



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with April Gornik, 2008
June 2-3

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with April Gornik on 2008 June 2 and 3. The interview took place in Sag Harbor, NY, and was conducted by Robert Enright for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

April Gornik reviewed the transcript in 2019. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[Track AAA_gornik08_4116 is a test track.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's Monday, June 2, 2008. I'm Robert Enright, and I'm in Sag Harbor, New York, to interview April Gornik for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is tape one.

You know, I don't know much about Cleveland. And I want to get you to reminisce about growing up there and what it was like. And obviously, this is only the context of you being an artist. But I'm interested in knowing what your memories of the city are and what it was like growing up there.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, the city was different from where I grew up in the suburbs. The city was, you know, even by the time I was there, a bit of a Rust Belt city. When I was little was when the Cuyahoga [River] famously burned. The river caught on fire from the chemicals in it. I wasn't aware of it at that age, but everyone knew that it was a bit of a joke. And so the inner city was marked by being, by having a pronounced kind of segregation. There were a lot of poor African American people in the inner city. And then there was the suburbs, which is where I grew up in a suburb that was lower middle class and very kind of—not even Levittown [NJ], like lower middle class. I think it was built probably immediately after the war. I was told that when my parents first purchased the house I grew up in, which was really, really small, that there were fields out behind them with strawberries and things growing in them. And they quickly turned into this burst of suburbs that just kept going on infinitum.

And even as a child, I felt the restriction of that. I didn't like it, particularly. I was living in my head so much at the time, and I—you know, when I'd look around me, I'd see that the actual boundaries of my life were very narrow, and it never felt comfortable. So I cannot say that that place was great. And you know, it was just absolutely classic suburbs: the flat lawn, the one tree every several yards, the sidewalk, the tree lawn. You know, everything was very orderly and very much the same. The area of the street that I grew up on was particularly more bleak. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Laughs.] The street was bleak and bleaker, bleakest?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. Well, there was a slightly older part of the street towards the main road. And then back where my house was, it was kind of more standardized, shall we say? And then around it in every direction for miles and miles and miles, the only way I remember it is just being one house after another. And eventually, if you drove a little ways, you'd get to what we all considered the country, which wasn't really. It was just slightly less developed. And there were a couple of horse-riding places there, which I profited from as a child, which was a great excitement for me, and some woodsier areas further out that, as I grew up, became developed as more suburbs. So I just grew up in a really suburban context.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You said you lived inside your head as a child a lot. Did you get encouragement at home from your parents to be a child whose imagination was richer than the space in which she was occupying?

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, yeah, definitely. Well, my mother was a huge reader. You know, she always said that she was not interested in little children, little babies and infants. She had no real patience for that stage of life. And I think that it made her very happy when I was old enough to read and take care of myself and have a book and absorb myself in it. And she did like reading books to me when I was little. So my fantasy life and reading went hand in hand. And I played outside a lot and had a lot of—had very elaborate imaginative narratives going on with the horses that I played—I played with horse statues a lot and dinosaurs and stuff like that. I had a toy train. I didn't really play with dolls very much. I was a bit of a tomboy. And I liked to pretend that I was a horse. And I'd set up jumps out in my backyard and jump over them. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: On all fours or with that kind of galloping that kids do when they're playing horses?

APRIL GORNIK: The gallop feet thing.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I know. That's great, that's great.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah, just a gallopy feet thing. And I was obsessed with everything horse.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And your father was also musical, because I know that it wasn't what he did for a living, but he played the trombone. And I gather—did that play in any way into your sense of how your imagination could function and what you thought was possible in life?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, because he was a very eccentric person and the minute he came home, he'd change into tennis shoes and then jeans and a sweatshirt. And I know the other dads didn't look like him and didn't act like him. And he didn't talk like them, because he spoke a sort of a jazzist [laughs] language. I knew that his—he represented something different and he had different, quirky views about things. And he just comported himself in a very eccentric way. And I think that that gave me the right and the feeling of rightness about doing something that was alternate.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You knew he was eccentric, did you? You could tell that he was different from other fathers?

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, yeah. Yes, and it was also embarrassing to me as a child. You know, like we'd go into a store, and he'd talk to all of the employees and he'd ask for free samples. And he'd do all of these things that I thought were hideously embarrassing and that now I find myself doing, you know, talking to everybody and carrying on like that. And he—I remember he got Will and Ariel Durant's big—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: *History of Philosophy* [Will Durant. *The Story of Philosophy*.].

APRIL GORNIK: History, philosophy. He had these big tomes that he seemed to read. But the other thing is that he was mentally ill. And this was not always particularly manifest. But there were a few years where he was seriously incapacitated by mental illness. And so at that time, that was when I was—the serious part when I was about maybe five till nine, kind of in that stretch. And within that was the most serious part, for a few years. And he was hospitalized. He had shock treatments, you know, the whole kit and caboodle at that time. And he was diagnosed with some sort of OCD catatonia, depressive, whatever. You know, he just sort of—he had a separate room from my mother, and he just closed the door and didn't come out. And what I vividly remember is seeing a closed door in front of me from that time period. But he—and he didn't play his trombone at all during that time. And then he gradually began to play it again. And that coincided with him getting better. I associated him playing the trombone with getting better. My mother associates the shock treatments with him getting better. [Laughs.] I do associate art with, you know, a positive state of mind. You know, however depressive my or someone else's personal feelings are, I think of it as like the right thing to do. So anyway—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It seems naive in a way to ask, but was this hard on you as a young child? I mean, you knew your father was different anyway. Suddenly, for him to be the man behind the closed door who you had no access to, was that a difficult adjustment to make?

APRIL GORNIK: I think it happened much more gradually than I realized. And the symptoms of it weren't so clear to me when I was really little. I remember—I'm sure this has something to do with painting landscapes. But I remember feeling that the safest place to be was outside. And the best time of year was the summer because I could spend all day long outside and just sort of by myself in a place that seemed safe. So I think that it had a huge effect on me, but very hard to gauge then because I was working so hard to maintain the denial that my entire family was in about it. You know, mental illness was a great embarrassment and shame for families at that time. So people really didn't talk about it. And it was in fact a neighbor who said, "You know your father is really sick, don't you?" And I remember saying this, and I remember looking at her and going, "No," because I really didn't know—I didn't know it overtly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah. You could easily have developed into only en plein air painter, given your background. [Laughs.]

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: As one that always wanted to be outside with nature, you know, on her easel.

APRIL GORNIK: Right, right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So when was it when you realized, or did you realize, that being an artist or having some kind of freedom that art would embody was something you could do? Did that come early or was that a later recognition?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, I always liked to make things when I was little. As I said, my mom kind of cut me loose. I mean, she was a very—I think she's a very kind of creative, imaginative person in her own right. She just wasn't

a very—she wasn't always so present. I mean, obviously, if your husband is mentally ill, you're—and then she also got pregnant with my brother about—not uncoincidentally, at the same time that he developed this really, really bad phase. So just because I had to do—I had to take care of myself so much, it just became sort of natural to turn to all sorts of—well, it seems natural to me that I turned to all sorts of creative things. I guess that's not obviously the way that someone would go. But to me, it seemed like the obvious thing to do. Nobody's around, and you're just kind of like providing for yourself. So the most fun and amusing things is to draw and make things. And you know, I just did—I was always making things. And that included pictures and drawing and painting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And so it was something that you enjoyed. Did you get approval for it? Or was it sufficiently self-absorbing that that was enough for you?

APRIL GORNIK: You know, I think that it would have been enough. But I did get approval for it. And my father, especially when he was better, would—and went back to work at Erie Lackawanna Railroad, which was his day job activity—he would bring things that I'd made into work and show them to people, which of course pleased me and embarrassed me at the same time. And my mother thought it was only right that she should have interesting, creative children, so—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Ergo, creative child.

APRIL GORNIK: Yes. So they were definitely supportive. And when my father died and then I was pondering college choices, my mother was very encouraging about going to art school. I don't know if she had any idea of the extent to which I was ambitious at the time. But she definitely was encouraging.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What was the Cleveland Institute [of Art] like as a school to go to, pretty conservative?

APRIL GORNIK: The Cleveland Institute was a really basic, you know, foundation-oriented school. They had a five-year program. I know we've talked about this before, so I feel funny repeating it, but I guess—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Not for this. [Laughs.]

APRIL GORNIK: Anyway, it was a five-year course. And there was watercolor the first year. And all sorts of fundamental kinds of drawing classes and art history classes. And the second year was another kind of year of foundation in which you got to do oil painting. And then I don't know why they thought watercolor would have in some way, you know, logically preceded oil painting. And then the third year you were cut loose in a class called Creative Drawing, which everyone looked forward to enormously, which got into more interesting kinds of drawing problems.

And they had managed to stretch out the college to a five-year course, which to me at this point thinking about it just means they made one more year's tuition off of kids. Why else would they have done that, when everybody else, or most other colleges were four year? It didn't really make that much sense to me. But anyway, I left before the last year, so—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Oh, so did you do an actual degree there before you went to NSCAD [Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Canada]?

APRIL GORNIK: No, no. I got to my fourth year. And because I'd gotten to interested in conceptual art at the time, I thought I really wanted more stimulation. I'd also been receiving a half scholarship for the last couple of years. But my work had like veered into this, you know, admittedly, really bad personalized version of conceptual art. But I thought it was very exciting, and I was very insulted and annoyed that they didn't renew my scholarship. And my boyfriend—my on-and-off-again boyfriend, who was kind of semi-on-and-off that whole last year, was going to NSCAD. And I was extremely jealous that he had that opportunity. And I just thought, the hell with this. I'm going to apply and go to what Sol Lewitt called, you know, the most hip art school in North America and go do something that's really important and meaningful. So I just took off. And they accepted me. And it was all very impulsive, like very last minute. I applied—I remember I applied in June. I mean, I just left.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And we didn't talk about the kind of work you were doing. How did you get interested in conceptual work at Cleveland, and what was the nature of the work you were doing there when you say it was personalized conceptualism? Who were you looking at and why would you have moved in that direction in Cleveland?

APRIL GORNIK: You know, these are notions that I had that the work was conceptual art. I wouldn't know how to characterize it now. Now to me it just looks like, you know, school work, someone in school. I was doing printmaking. I had three really great teachers at the Cleveland Institute of Art. I had Carroll Castle, who recently passed away, who was my printmaking teacher and talked about binary notions in art and the way art feeds itself with metaphor. And I just loved him. And I thought he was so interesting. And the way that he spoke about

art was so interesting that I ended up majoring in printmaking when I was there. And—which was kind of meaningless because I spent at least that much time in my—you know, doing painting type things.

And then I had Julian Stanchak, who is, for lack of a better word—and it really is an improper way of describing his work, but it fits with the genre—and op-art painter. But he was the most brilliant, perspicacious teacher. He would come around—I remember I had him in drawing class. I think it was when I was a sophomore. And he would come around and look at people's work. And he would say, "Here you looked at what you saw. And you are able to draw it. And this section, you didn't look at all. You got so bored, you were lazy. You shouldn't have let that happen." And he would scold us for points of inattention that occurred when we were working. And he was so right.

And I owe all of my teaching ability to him because, every time I go into somebody's studio, all I have to do is sit down and look at their work and say, "Here you were bored. Here you were there. Why did you leave when you left? What is it about this section that really engaged you. And now you have to figure out how not to let that happen in the rest of it, because otherwise, this would be a work of art. And right now it's just this mish-mush of things." And it was great.

And then the third teacher that was really useful for me at the—or good for me at the Cleveland Institute of Art was this guy named Ed Mitchkowski. And he was really—he was like the bad boy. He was like the wild-boy teacher. And he went to New York frequently. And he was a part of some, I realize now, rather obscure group of artists that had named themselves. And he did these kinds of abstract things. And he would rant. He would like carry on these drawing classes, these creative classes, in which he'd rant and talk about things and what was going on in New York. And I would say that 80 percent of the time, we had no idea what he was talking about.

But his energy was such that he compelled people, you know, got them excited and certainly got us all excited about New York and about men, even though we weren't sure what the hell he was talking about. And it was he who talked a lot about contemporary art and talked about conceptual art and made me more interested in reading theory and stuff like that. So by the time I left the Cleveland Institute of Art I had, you know, read a good chunk of Piaget, and Claude Lévi-Strauss and the kinds of French intellectual movements that were occurrent and influential at the time.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And were very good to take you to NSCAD, obviously.

APRIL GORNIK: Yes. And then when I got to NSCAD, I took the Marxism course that was offered, and, you know, tried to—and took studio. I didn't even consider taking painting. And I worked with people that were interested also in conceptual art. And I was using photographs and captioning them, and that's what the work looked like. And I was—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Photographs that you had taken of your—self-portraits or—

APRIL GORNIK: Photographs that I had taken—no, photographs that I had taken, but I remember like some of the work that I liked the best at that time was work that looked like John Fernie, who was a teacher there. I mean, not exactly like, but it was influenced by that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yes.

APRIL GORNIK: I was, you know, searching for and reaching out and sort of imitating different kinds of things that I was seeing and kind of trying on things to see if they seemed like me.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But you're only what? You're 23 or 24? You're very young, aren't you?

APRIL GORNIK: Twenty-two then, or—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: Twenty-one or twenty-two. And then it was after I got out of school that I started to really see things, you know, for myself. Because I was just such an easily influenced student. And I was so anxious to make an impression. I wanted people to think I was smart, I wanted them to think that—I wanted to be judged okay by other people. I was very conscious of that and, seemingly, uncontrollably, because I didn't, you know, try to reject that in myself. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Was it the right school for you to go to at the time? I mean, you go there as an already, in your own sense, your own estimation, a kind of conceptualist—go to a school in which painting had been declared dead. And it was, as Lewitt implied, said, the most advanced art school maybe in North America.

APRIL GORNIK: "Is this the best art school in North America?" was his title, yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So was that the place for you to go, do you think, at the time?

APRIL GORNIK: I think that, you know, having been raised Catholic, and then having needed to reject Catholicism and getting a lot of strength from that, I think it was probably good for me to have been at a very fundamentalist, if I may use that term, kind of art college like the Cleveland Institute; and then rejecting that and going to Nova Scotia. And then becoming like a devoted, dyed-in-the-wool, albeit bad, conceptual artist, and then being able to reject that, finally. And then the funny thing, of course, about painting is that, once you start painting and once you start a life of poetic self-expression, you can't do any of that anymore, if you're really doing it, because your paintings talk back to you. You can't control them. You're not really in control of where you're going. And once you start doing that, like all the cards go up on the air and stay there, pretty much for the rest of your life.

I mean, you know, landscape is a big anchor. But painting is still a big, you know, complex ball of imparsability. You know, I just can't completely parse the whole thing. So that's sort of nice to have ended up there, after having, you know, been devoted and then rejecting and then devoted and rejecting and then devoted and rejecting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The story of you getting to be—I mean, as you've pointed out, it was one thing at NSCAD to be a painter. Of all things, you end up painting landscape, which is kind of the tail end of painting.

APRIL GORNIK: Of all.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So were you aware—how aware were you of how much of an apostasy, in lots of ways, what you were doing, would have been in that city?

APRIL GORNIK: I was very aware of it because I remember the first time I felt like I accidentally made a landscape. I was just trying to make something that had something to do with light. And I got an idea in my head. And I made this thing. I had to make it two-dimensional because it turned out that it was a picture of something that represented light, which I hadn't done in a really long time. And so in order to make it, it had to be two-dimensional. And then when I got the thing filled in, which is the way that I painted it at that time—I was—it sounds so funny, but I really wasn't even thinking of it being a painting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It was an inadvertent painting, landscape? You didn't know that that's what you were doing?

APRIL GORNIK: Not really, because I felt—I just had this idea about light. And an image popped into my head. And I worked—you know how when you get an idea, sometimes it can feel trance-like? So I just suddenly started scurrying around, putting materials together and grabbing paint where I could find it. And I know that some of it wasn't even like, regular paint. I think some of it was house paint and some of it was whatever was in my studio. And then I made this image, which was three or four sticks at the edge of water. It was a little vertical image. And it was backlit. And it was very, very bright behind the sticks. And that's what the image was.

And it felt like the strangest sensation to step back and look at it and think, "Oh, my God, I've just made a painting," and then an almost simultaneous realization was like, "Oh no, God help me, this is a landscape. What am I going to do now?" Because it was something that I was so excited about. It was like I discovered light and I discovered painting all by myself in my studio, after all those art classes. It's like nobody taught me anything. I was that incorrigible, apparently. And then, of course, the next several things that I did were done the same way because I was so scared at having done this thing, but also so excited, that I made more objects, which were, as this one had been, made of one-by-fours glued together and then sawed off to make a rectangular plane and then painted on those.

And then eventually, I had to start using plywood because it was becoming too unwieldy, all this gluing. And then the plywood very—actually, pretty quickly, went up in size. And then by the time I had moved to New York, which was not that long after that, I had jumped up to full sheets of plywood. And then of course, that was unacceptable because I couldn't get to nine feet with a four-by-eight sheet of plywood. I remember I needed to make a painting that was five by nine feet. So I had to break down and order a canvas. But the whole—you know, in that early, early time, the whole way along, I just kept thinking, "I can't be doing this. I can't be painting."

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You must have felt like Hester [Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter*.] with a scarlet "P" on your forehead. [Laughs.] They could see that you were a fallen woman by this time. My heavens!

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. I mean, honestly. Probably only someone raised by nuns could have such a completely neurotic response to, just, trying something new, which one could break this whole thing down to. But anyway, so then I just kept working from that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But did you—I mean, you weren't showing yet. Had you already graduated and were

waitressing, and this was work that you were doing rather discreetly in your studio and not showing it to anyone at the time?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah, because after I graduated from Nova Scotia—and that was in '76, you know, my first move as I was graduating was to think, "Woop, now I have to think about graduate school." And I applied to CalArts because that was the other place that I was supposed to be, you know, the other cool school. And I got accepted. But you know, barring like—they needed one other form or something like that. And all of a sudden, I just thought to myself, "What am I doing? I don't want to go to school." And I just abruptly rejected it. And that was another kind of odd impulse that I hadn't thought I would—I was capable of. And then I went to Europe that summer after I graduated from NSCAD and traveled for a couple of months on my own and looked at a lot of art, and saw many, many, many, many, many, many museums.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Looking at painting?

APRIL GORNIK: I looked at everything. I looked at African art. I looked at paintings that I had only ever seen in books all my life. I wanted to see all that stuff in real life. And I saw a lot of African and oceanic art because I was starting to think that maybe the answer to what to do about painting and art being so dead and elitist in a culture was to try to bring it into our culture somehow. And so I was looking at other cultures to see how art was so well integrated in theirs. I'd taken anthropology in Cleveland and thought I knew something about that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Lévi Strauss was back haunting you.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah, there was Claude. [Laughs.] Yeah, so all of that stuff made me look at all of those things. And the funniest—in retrospect, the funniest experience from that trip of that summer in 1976 was going through the Mauritshuis museum in Den Haag in Holland because I was—in a sense, I was kind of ticking off museums off my list. And I'd gotten to that one. And I was going through them. And I remember I was going through a long section—I believe the museum has completely been renovated, you know, rearranged, because I've seen it since. And it is a really beautiful museum.

But I was going through a long section of portraiture. And I was tearing through it because that really was something that I found excruciatingly boring. And—but I was flying by Vermeer's *View of Delft*, and I actually put on the brakes and kind of screeched to a halt and just stood there and looked at it. And I remember like looking at it for a really long time. But I don't remember having one thought about it. I just remember standing there and looking at it. But I do vividly remember this. And then I kind of woke up and continued my speed tour through the rest of the museum. I think that was like late in the day at that point, went back to Amsterdam to my little hotel, you know, did whatever it was I did at night—usually, eat a piece of cheese and go to sleep, and then get up and go look at more museums.

But I didn't even think of that until years and years and years later in New York—I think it was in New York—where that painting had traveled and was in a show. And I saw it, and my jaw dropped. I was like, "That painting—I saw that painting before." And by that time, I'd been painting landscapes. I'd been painting landscapes that had a sense of interior and exterior, which is all contained in that painting. It has a kind of proscenium setting to it, which that painting also has, which has this kind of path of light that leads you back into it, which is something that's informed my work for a long time. So there were all these things that I owe that painting, big time, but I just hadn't formulated a thing. But I felt like, you know, somehow or another I got, you know, it was like a message from the future [laughs] that I wasn't ready for. But, you know, maybe the first painting even was, you know, in some way triggered by that or something.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So you decide not to go on to school, and you decide basically to come to New York. By this time, I think you and Eric are probably together; are you?

APRIL GORNIK: Yes.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So why New York is kind of an obvious question. It was the center, it was the place where you wanted to be. You said you were culturally ambitious. This would have been a place full of ideas.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. It just seemed like a no-brainer. I didn't—I would never have gone back to Cleveland because I didn't even like the town to begin with. And I hadn't been that many places. I'd been to New York a couple of times with friends. You know, we drove across Pennsylvania to see things and to try to get into Max's Kansas City, I remember that. We did.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: For the food or the artists?

APRIL GORNIK: For the artists. We just wanted to be in the scene. I remember like kind of going in there and getting a table and then sitting there like deer in headlights, not knowing what to do with ourselves, probably leaving before anyone got there. [Laughs.] But, you know, we tried. And so I'd always to go to New York. It just

seemed like the only place to be. You know, it's the seat of energy, it really is.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yes. And by this time are you convinced that in fact you are a landscape painter, that there was no fooling?

APRIL GORNIK: No, because—not really. I can't really say that. I mean, I wish I could. But when we first moved down to New York, it was in '78. I went down early, actually, and found us a sublet. And then we moved all our stuff down. And I started working on landscapes. But I got really embarrassed. And I thought, "This is never going to fly here. If someone comes into my studio and sees that I'm making landscapes"—and by the way, I had decided to honor a commitment that I made to myself to not show work to anybody for a year. I don't know how I got the "year" out of it, but I decided, I'll just work in my studio for a year and I'll see if the landscape thing sticks. And when I began doing them, I immediately became embarrassed, and I thought, "I can't do this. I should—maybe I can shift it." And so I started doing interiors, like—which also had space and some light. But I felt literally claustrophobic doing them.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You literally painted yourself into a corner.

APRIL GORNIK: I literally—exactly. I can't tell you how literal. I don't even know if I have any images of those pictures. But they were like rooms with little tracks and things running through them. And I just—I hated doing them, I have to say. You know, and after like doing this for a month or two, I just started to feel like, let me out; I need air. And I just went back to painting landscapes. And since then, I haven't tried to do anything else.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But you were that sufficiently embarrassed. I mean, you really wouldn't want to have shown those paintings to anybody because you were embarrassed by them?

APRIL GORNIK: I was. But then the other lucky coincidental thing is that—I think it was during that year, maybe, the New Image show occurred at the Whitney Museum. And it was Bob Moskowitz and all these people—Lois Lane—people that were doing quasi-imagistic work, not with space like I was doing, but at least with imagery. And it seemed like the hegemony of Minimalism had suddenly, you know, come a little undone. And it was possible to be doing something else. And then when I first started showing work to people, they weren't outright rejecting it. I mean, Patterson Sims came. He'd been a curator at the Whitney, and someone told me I should have him to my studio; God only knows why. And he was—he looked bemused and mentioned that it was retarded terror. And I was really insulted and hated him for saying that. And Barbara Toll came, and she thought it was interesting. There was just—I think I had like three people over to the studio. And it was a year after. You know, I kind of kept my promise to myself.

And you know, there was marginal interest. But by that time, I was starting to think, like, geez, will I ever put my work in a gallery or anything like that? Eric had come down with an introduction to Ed Thorpe by David True, who had come up to the school at NSCAD and talked to the students. And so Ed Thorpe was already interested in his work. And we had a policy of never allowing my work to be visible when Thorpe would come by because, you know, *sense c'est pas*. And one day he came by. And it was like a Saturday morning or something. And I didn't know he was coming by, and my work was out. And he saw it. And he liked it and he kind of immediately said, "Can I put some of these in a group show?" And I stupidly went, "Oh yeah, sure," because I was just excited that something was finally happening. And I really didn't think through to the consequences of being in the same gallery with my boyfriend, which was indeed a bad idea.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Oh, was it?

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, yeah, I'd say so. I mean, because obviously, there's so much jealousy and competition between all artists anyway. And we were young artists. And I think you're even worse when you're younger. And so of course, we were like watching each other make work and doing well and selling or not. I mean, luckily, both of us started selling work, like kind of right away. And he did. And then he also—Eric also had a patron, actually, in the form of a person named Ed Downe. But yeah, I wouldn't recommend that. I do try to discourage people whenever possible from being in the same profession as their other.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So when you recognized that it was legitimate, at least, even necessary maybe—maybe this is more psychological than pragmatic as far as the art was concerned—that it was okay to be a landscape painter, did you then start in any systematic way to start to look at landscape painters to find out what they had done, to figure out how you fit in in relation to what was clearly a great tradition of painting?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, I had brought over kind of a sense of—you know, I wouldn't call it intellectual rigor. In fact, I'd call it the opposite. But I would say that—[laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What is the opposite of intellectual rigor, by the way?

APRIL GORNIK: Sloppy thinking.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I got it, I got it. That's what I thought.

APRIL GORNIK: I would say that what I did, basically, was decide that—and this was unconscious. But I sort of determined that, okay, maybe I was painting landscapes. But I had some rules for myself. One was, always make everything up. And I had begun dreaming vividly in landscape images after I started painting them. Even after the first couple, I just—it opened up this like big—must have been lurking there for years and years—a repository or treasure of images that would like come into dreams. And I painted a lot from dreams at that time.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I didn't know that the source of all of your work had been dreamed-based all along.

APRIL GORNIK: Not all of it, but a lot of it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Wow.

APRIL GORNIK: I did a lot of work from dreams. And it seemed to legitimize the creativity of it, to me, in some way. So that seemed to make them being landscapes be more authentic or interesting or whatever. And so, I mean, I started painting landscapes in '77, I guess, technically. And then in 1980, in May—people had told me, "Oh, you'll really like the American Southwest. Wait till you see that." And I even did a painting that I imagined the Grand Canyon to look like, for instance. I just sort of made it up. I'd make up things, I'd paint from dreams. You know, I just had to make everything up to make it seem legit.

And then I got a little camera. Someone gave me a little camera to use. And we went to Lake Powell and the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley and Canyon de Chelly, all these like kind of scenic points of interest in Northern Arizona, when we went out to visit Eric's family. Drove up, saw these things. And I remember like driving up towards the Grand Canyon. We got to the high desert. And I had never seen such vastness. I mean, there's one thing to look at—I used to look at the shores of Lake Erie and scare myself as a kid, because it was just so endless. But there's something that's almost more vast about the high desert, the desert out there because you can actually see more of what's in the distance, even though you can't wrap your head around it.

And I remember—Eric always makes fun of me about this. But we got up to the high desert. And I got out of the car, and I looked around, and I just burst into tears, just—I was just so kind of moved and shocked and undone by the whole thing. I'd never imagined space like that. And I guess I had a big yearning for it because it like a huge satisfaction to see it. And then when we got up to the Grand Canyon, that was more amazement, and Monument Valley was even more amazement. And I started taking photographs because—and, you know, thinking, "Maybe I have to work from photographs, because I couldn't make this stuff up." You know? I was never going to dream it because I couldn't get my head that far out, I guess, and to imagine possibilities, that kind of space, et cetera.

So when I got back, really like in fear and trembling because I was going against my own rules, to which I was clinging as part of my rationale for doing what I was doing, I started working from the photographs. And what I did was, I'd take a photograph, and then I'd resketch it. And I'd feel like I was doing it pretty much exactly. And then—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And so you would manually transfer it from the photograph to a surface?

APRIL GORNIK: I would take the photograph. And then I would do—I would sketch in my sketchbook an image that was usually maybe three by five inches or four by six inches. And I would like sketch it in. And I'd sort of rework the composition of the photograph. And then I'd do it again and again. I'd do it a couple of times until I got something that I thought was really capturing the feeling of the thing that I was seeing in the photographs. It wasn't like the photograph, per se. It was the thing that I knew was living in there. So I'd make a picture, a little sketch, that I thought represented that. And then I'd—at that time I was making my own stretchers and stretching them myself and stuff. And then I'd exactly figure out how big that would be, using one of those—oh, God—proportion wheels. I'd use a proportion wheel. [Laughs.]

It was such a nightmare using those things, I'd forgot the name of it. I'd use a proportion wheel, and then I'd figure out the size of the canvas. And then I'd go buy my lumber and I'd make a stretcher. And then I'd make that painting. And I just kept going like this. And within a fairly short time, I realized that the way that I was making paintings out of photographs, I couldn't stick to the photograph to save my life. I was like all over the place with it. And I gradually—I mean, it took, you know, awhile. But I gradually realized that I could trust myself to interfere with what I was seeing in a way that I ultimately thought was positive. And that's continued to this day, really. You know, like the computer has come in and everything. But—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's still essentially the process? You're still taking the photograph? Now you're making them up in the computer mostly, aren't you?

APRIL GORNIK: Yes, yes. I use Photoshop all the time. It's the best sketch tool I've ever had because it's basically

exactly what I was doing when I was sketching, you know, making little sketches in a notebook. But it's just using like all the Photoshop tools. So I'll take a photograph of the desert. And then I'll take a photograph of a storm above the ocean. And I'll take the sky from the ocean and I'll stick it above the desert. And then I'll stretch out one part of it. And then I'll take another part and I'll redo that. And then I'll add a tree here. And dah-dah-dah-dah. It's like a cooking thing, almost, you know, where I need this and I need that.

And it's all very intuitive and it's all very like play. It's very—it's just, you know, kind of groping through an image, looking, looking, looking for that thing that I thought I recognized at first that gave me a shock of recognition that felt like looking at my soul or looking at something that had deep meaning for me or looking at something that jolted me or posed mystery.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's in that sense that you talk about your landscapes as being interiorizations rather than ways to try and replicate something that is already out there in nature that you're simply, in one sense, rendering.

APRIL GORNIK: Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: These landscapes come from the inside-out, then, if one has to measure the direction of their making?

APRIL GORNIK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, all of the kinds of decision making that I do when I'm composing a picture has to do with looking for that ability to transmit the kind of interiorized vision that I had when I was looking at it. And to me, working with something that's so outside myself is—perhaps this sounds odd. But it seems like, of course, that's the perfect—that becomes then the perfect metaphor for the interior, because the further out you go, the more you're into the realm of the other, so the more true it is. Because the more complexity you can put into something, the truer it always is. And that's the way I think I think about it, if that makes sense. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Laughs.] I'm not sure. I have to rest for half an hour to think about that.

APRIL GORNIK: I'm so happy I got that out. To myself, that sounded very clear.

[END TRACK AAA_gornik08_4117.]

[Track AAA_gornik08_4118 is a test track.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Now, I might have interrupted you. You said you set rules for yourself. One of them was that you always had to invent. Were there other rules that you had set for yourself initially about the landscape making that you adhered to for some period of time? Or was that the fundamentally main one?

APRIL GORNIK: No. Just that it had to—that was the basis for it being truly poetic instead of something that was concocted or ideational.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Sure.

APRIL GORNIK: You know. So once I left the ideational and my love for what I thought was conceptual art and allowed myself to do this other thing, I had to have like a good foundation of allowance for myself, because I always had to allow myself to do something because I was always so hard on myself, so—that's silly, but—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: No, but interestingly enough, that is a residual conceptualism in some senses, isn't it, that in some ways it's a question of problem solving. There are rules, there are ways. So you're setting a framework within which you're prepared either to operate or to step outside of it.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It still carries that residue.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, you heard that I just said that I was happy that I expressed something that sounded, at least to me, clear. And it's important to me, like when I'm talking, to articulate things that I've learned about my work, most of which is retroactive to making it. But I rely on my mind, probably more than I should. But again, it's like an old thing from my childhood—live in my head, rely on my intelligence. Don't trust things if they seem too nebulous, et cetera. And yet, the things that I'm painting are way nebulous. They're extremely nebulous. So there's an irony in there somewhere. But that's—you know, I'm just telling you what I tell myself. I'm quite aware of the little paradoxes of it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, obviously, you read through the body of criticism about your work and the school of painting that comes up most often. And we should sort of set the record straight about the Luminists.

APRIL GORNIK: Oh yeah. I meant to go back to that because you asked about it. You know, did I just interrupt you?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: No, not at all. No, no, no, that's not possible. I mean, I want to know about everything.

APRIL GORNIK: I think it is. [Laughs.] When I was—when I'd first gotten to New York, and then I had continued to paint landscapes, we used to see this friend who actually had been teaching up at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, named Bob Berlind, very nice guy, so smart, and a plein air painter, actually, and a good one, and one reason I once tried that, too—very bad effects, but that's a whole other story. Bob was looking at my work and gave me this catalogue from Kynaston McShine's show, called "The Natural Paradise" [1976], I think was the title of it. And it was at the Museum of Modern Art. And there were all these luminous paintings, and Albert Pinkham Ryder. And I think it went up—it was kind of like within Robert Rosenblum's kind of mind set about American painting being influenced by—directly by landscape and Luminism. And—but I didn't know that at the time.

But anyway, Bob gave me this catalogue and said, you know, "You should look at this work." And it was jaw-dropping for me because I felt like he'd just handed me, you know, the book of my ancestors or something. And when I was at the Cleveland Institute of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art was right across the street. And we used to go wander around in it a lot. I knew that the cool places to be at the museum were the African art section and the modern art section and the recent modern art section, which included Impressionism, back to that.

So I would go from those sections back and forth, a lot. I spent quite a bit of time perusing that art. And there was a corridor in between in which there was Frederic Church's painting *Twilight in the Wilderness* and a number of other Luminist paintings. And I never paid any attention to them. And I remember looking through this catalogue and kind of going, "Some of these look familiar." Literally, I was—not even the first time I was looking at it. Later I noticed that like *Twilight in the Wilderness* said that it was at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and I kind of thought, "Oh, and no wonder this looks"—[laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Familiar. [Laughs.] It is familiar.

APRIL GORNIK: I couldn't believe it. I mean, how outrageous is that? But I was such a good student. I was so programmed to know what I was supposed to like and what I was supposed to look at. And so then that was great. And then the thing that really got me excited, looking at that catalogue, was I liked the Kensett sheer kind of empty landscapes. I liked Church's wild psychedelic colors. I couldn't believe them. Loved Ryder's paintings—loved, loved, loved Ryder's paintings. That was really a wonderful revelation. Arthur Dove—you know, I started looking more at those people. But it was nice to find out that I had these ancestors, is how I think of them.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And they seemed legitimate. That was a legitimate place for you to look back, even though you didn't know about them. I mean—

APRIL GORNIK: Well, you know, frankly, I felt defensive about them. When I was at NSCAD, we had a course on Canadian art history. And Tommy Thompson and the group of seven were taught to us. And I took it all with a grain of salt. I thought, "Hm, you know." I just wasn't interested in it, frankly. And that's a whole different school of landscape painting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's a Nordic school of landscape painting and not—

APRIL GORNIK: It's just very different.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. And not uninteresting, but I didn't find it particularly exciting. I don't know why. I mean, I haven't ever stopped to wonder about this. But it strikes me as being odd that I didn't sort of go back to that. I went right sort of to the Luminist thing. But then I began, you know, looking much harder at that stuff. But I also became sort of instantly defensive, because I remember never having been taught it at all at the Cleveland Institute of Art. They just skipped that whole thing. And now I understand that it is taught or at least is referenced in some fashion. But when I was in school, we never heard boo about it. So I knew what I wasn't supposed to like.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So what comes out in that is that it is some relationship to a kind of Romanticism and the whole concept of the sublime, and all of a sudden, Burke and notions of beauty of Kant start coming in. Were you beginning to take their measure as well as notions about what art could be about or about how one got there or

about how one would describe what it is either you were after or what, say, the Luminists had achieved?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, how does the vocabulary change for you? Because you talk—you have always talked well and significantly about the idea behind art and not just the object itself as it's made.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, I didn't really—you know, I was so at that point, I didn't want to read things about—I didn't want to queer the deal. I didn't want to confuse myself and I didn't want to get theoretical again. And, you know, people would mention the sublime or beauty, and I thought, "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, this makes sense." But I sort of was like, Mother, please, I'd rather make it up myself, at that point. [. . . -AG] I did read Robert Rosenblum's book [*Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* -AG]. I don't mean to be like this. It's just I have an aversion to reading art theory at this point, like a strong aversion. Anyway, I definitely have read snippets of many things that I've thought were influential and fascinating, just not anything that directly related to the sublime and Luminism and all of that. The first time that I used those sorts of terms—I remember this well—was in the early, very early '80s. I was invited up to Banff [The Banff Centre] to give a talk, which was very exciting, to have been asked to give a talk. And I remember talking about—you know, showing the few slides that I had, and I talked about—I think I mentioned beauty once, and I mentioned poetry once.

And someone in the audience afterwards said, "What are you talking about?" as though those words were so taboo. And I actually had slipped into them and didn't realize that I had potentially embarrassed myself. And I just became, you know, very defensive and said that, you know, they had a right to exist. I shouldn't say I was defensive. I defended myself at that juncture. But it was exactly the sort of thing that would, you know, have scared me. And then I just went back to New York and kind of realized that I just had to kind of own that, you know, that I was into poetry.

The other great thing, though, that the same person, Bob Berlind, did for me, had more—I mean, he must have been a wonderful teacher. He was never my teacher, but he must have been fantastic—is he gave me a copy of Gaston Bachelard's book, *The Poetics of Space*. And that book, I read cover to cover and pretty much memorized. And see, that's—what's interesting about that book is that Bachelard is writing about poetry and how it works. But in order to write about poetry, he wrote a poetic book. He didn't even try to be theoretical about it, really, I don't think. I mean, maybe he thought he was being theoretical. And he'd explain poetry. I mean, he'd talk about intimacy and immensity and miniaturization and all these things that I still talk about and think about to this day. But he didn't do it in such a way where he was really explaining it. He really just accumulated examples that forcefully and beautifully made his point. And you know, I think it's a terrific book. So that's the kind of thing that I like to read and think about. And that was a huge eye-opener for me because it began me realizing that there were ways of articulating what I was doing. And before that, it was very difficult.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You had no vocabulary to describe what it was you were doing then?

APRIL GORNIK: I was almost rejecting a vocabulary. I would talk about space and light. And I had—at the very, very early points that I was painting, I know somebody told me about—oh God, a book called like *Life after Life* about people who have near-death experiences, that I checked out, because they thought that those images that were described were a lot like my paintings. And in fact, they are. But you know, like kind of rushing toward light, skimming over a landscape, et cetera, et cetera. I could see where they were coming from. And of course, it was appealing to me to think that I was somehow psychically channeling a very important and little-understood experience. [They laugh.] I don't know how much you could say about that in a lecture, so, anyway.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, as you know, we've talked—Emily Dickinson describes death as the white exploit. Her recognition of death is not that it's a loop into darkness, but in fact as an observer of death—because she watched lots of people die and they were—their house was on the road to cemetery in New England. And so she had the understanding. And we now know, appropriately, that death in fact is probably a movement into some kind of bright whiteness. And so death for her in the poetic frame is called the white exploit, which is a gorgeous phrase.

APRIL GORNIK: She's easily one of the most astonishing things that have ever happened to this world. I read all of her poems a couple of summers ago. Did I tell you about that? Oh, my God. I was like in heaven for months. It was so great.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You got the Johnson three-volume edition of the Belknap Harvard collected poems and all the variant editions?

APRIL GORNIK: It was one volume. But it was a big, fat thing. And it took forever, and I just loved it. I didn't want it to end. But her—but when she's visionary, she's so far beyond—I mean, talk about containing complexity. Oh, my God. It's brilliant. It's brilliant. I have a favorite poem. I'll have to dig it up for you because I wouldn't hazard reciting it. And all the good ones are all about death, of course. And all the good paintings are all about death, of

course. You know, it's transitory. It's the transitoriness of everything.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I want to get into the role of writing and reading and how it plays in your imagination. But I want to go back a little ways to the notion of landscape. When you start, when you realize you're a landscape painter, you realize there's a pedigree for being a landscape painting, as well. You look at the Luminists and other landscape painters. I mean, there are great European landscape painters as well, which I assume you're also looking at. When you begin to start to ask yourself, How do I make a landscape?, which raises the structural and compositional side of how to make a painting, not just that it's an interior thing, but somehow emanates out—but then you also have to make it. Did you start to sort of strategize how paintings get made as well? And did this become part of the repertoire of your image making?

APRIL GORNIK: No. I would say that I thought about scale a lot. I thought about the scale of a painting a lot, the way that it felt experientially to be presented with a landscape. I thought about that. So I thought about size and shape. And I thought about the position of the horizon, which originated from flying dreams, for sure, for me, at the beginning, because when I have a flying dream, which happens less often now, I'm sorry to say—but when I do, I'm usually kind of a certain height above the ground. But it's not aerial. It's not like an aerial view. Very, very rarely do I get up really high. I'm happier at about, you know, bird and tree height, I guess. And—but I also thought that that's—I eventually started thinking—this wasn't an initial thought. I mean, I thought about that early on. But then I also thought that, in a sense, when you're up and you don't have a firm sense of or a clear sense of being grounded, that it sort of pushes you into the painting. So in a sense, I'm—I don't mean to say that I'm pushing people into my paintings. But in a sense, I'm trying to draw them, I'm trying to tip them in a little bit, I think. But again, that was like an intuitive thing that came from these dream things, and not from a scheming or a strategizing.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And not even from a recognition of the architectonics of landscape, though? Because one of the things that begins to happen in your work as it gets more and more complex visually is that you clearly are having to manage so many elements that it becomes a kind of architecture or composition. That's something clearly you're aware of.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, again that's something that came originally from a dream experience, because I remember it. It was 1980—or I think it was '83. And I'd woken up and I'd had this dream where there were—there was a desert vista. And there were clouds, pouring rain, from like a single cloud over the top of the painting—of the dream. And I saw them as like, almost like pillars or something. I painted them very much as pillars. But I saw them—they were Virgos, you know, these like kinds of schemes of cloud coming across. And then through that, I could see the desert lit up past them, way in the distance.

And I remember like waking up in the middle of the night and drawing down this dream and working on it, and during that painting, particularly, actually thinking, "I'm making architecture. I'm making this thing that has an inside and an outside. I'm looking into this painting. This is like a room," and thinking a lot about that kind of phenomenon. And that's something that I later found and recognized, re-recognized in *The View of Delft* because you have that same kind of thing. But in that painting, that was the first time that architecture seemed to play out. And then I started thinking about, What kind of space am I making? But I couldn't say that I would ever like be attracted to an image or an experience that felt like it should be a painting. I would never look at that and then think, "Aha. This has an architectural quality. Or if I just added this to this, then I'll be able to get that effect." You know, it just—I still don't—I don't know. For some reason, I don't think of them that clearly or I don't think of them that methodically. It's just not something—I mean, it's something—so many things that I talk about are, as I said, retroactively known about the work.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Scale is a pretty essential issue, clearly, for you. It has been conventionally one of the major issues of American painting.

APRIL GORNIK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, it even found its name in Greenbergian esthetics as big abstract art. Was your measure of scale, did it have to do with what had already been also done in American painting? Not just in the landscape form, but I'm even thinking particularly in the sense of abstraction. Were you aware of those sort of competing ideologies of picture-making that you had to deal with?

APRIL GORNIK: I was aware of large scale American painting. And I think that that made me feel that it was no challenge at all to me to imagine making large paintings. It seemed like that was just my natural right, I guess, as an American painter, in a sense. But I didn't think of it in terms of, this goes with a certain kind of American painting. You know, these paintings meet art history at a point of large scale paintings. I didn't think of it that way. I just never felt that it would be a problem to paint largish paintings. And you know, I've rarely painted a painting that's more than 12 feet wide. I'm not really interested in making a mural-size painting. They're large. But I do think of them much more in terms of my body and your body and the kind of average size of a human

being and the way that something gets big enough so you feel that you're in it. So in a sense, it feels like a presence that reflects the body, doesn't overwhelm it, but in fact reflects it so you could almost absorb yourself into it. Boy, that was really poorly said, but something like that, some measure of an ability to physically become what the space that you're looking at is.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's the measure of it's being experiential for you then?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. That's how I measure it.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: So—and that's usually the way I determine them. And sometimes, if they're just a little bit smaller, say, than eight feet or something, they work better, and sometimes if they're a little bigger. Sometimes there needs to be a certain kind of movement in them, because maybe instead of being caught up in a painting, you need to breathe across it or something. And it really varies.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Are those determinations made essentially intuitively, as you've decided to make a painting? I mean, you don't say, "Okay, this is going to be a 12-foot painting, but this subject better suits an eight-foot painting." Is that found in the making or found before the beginning?

APRIL GORNIK: It's—I always order canvasses based on a sketch that I've made, either a computer sketch or a literal sketch. And because I've been making paintings this big this long, I'm pretty good at guessing what's going to work. So—and sometimes I'll just get an urge to do something that's more expansive. It's a little bigger. I feel a need to like kind of spread out that way, for some reason. And I really don't know how to determine what that's about.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What about the drama of landscape? One of the things that has been in your work for a long time—and maybe in some ways, it's intensified—is the sense of the—I don't want to say theatricality, because that's too, I mean literally stagy. But maybe drama is a better word. And that comes—I mean, I'm looking even here. That often has to do with palette and density of what you would call weight of color. How do you decide about how much drama you want to invest in a particular canvas? Is it the image that's already told you that? Your dream has already told you that?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah, it's already there when I begin. I mean, that's the driving force of it. So it's not something that I would add to it as I'm going along. It's like the—it's already its reason for needing to exist, to me. And I mean, some of them seem so much more or less undramatic in terms of events, but then there's also like a parallel kind of drama that has to do with tension and release that's always in, I would say, all of my work really, if it's even modestly successful. There's like a sense of tension and release that's occurring all over them, which has to do, to me, with just a kind of physicality itself, just the way that we move and breathe and apprehend. There's just such a fundamental part. It's fundamental to time passing. It's a fundamental sense of past and future.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's not something that comes out of a theoreticizing, the Hoffmann kind of push-pull thing? I mean, does it have to do with how colors work as well? I mean, are there tricks to making that happen as well?

APRIL GORNIK: No, I don't think so, because I don't really think about color that way. I think about color in terms of like weights and balances and speed. I think a lot about colors being slow or fast. And I don't think so much about them—that push-pull thing has never been something I really related to. And the idea of like warm colors and cold colors, I just think is completely silly. That's just like—sorry. [Laughs.] That sounds horrible, but it's—to me, that's like Color 101, because you can do so much more with color than that, than thinking about it that way. I mean, color is one of those things where rules are really made to be broken.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Is the velocity you're talking about the speed with which the eye is able to apprehend and move across the surface of the painting? Or is it—

APRIL GORNIK: No, I think that, for instance, certain kinds of yellows are like high-speed colors. They have like an internal velocity. They're—I almost see them as being like highly charged, as having like movement within themselves, and then other colors as being slower and having different weight, therefore.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Weight for you is actually movement, interestingly, not necessarily density then, the way one think of—

APRIL GORNIK: Well, it's both. It's both. It varies. I mean, I also—that I would describe in a painting more as being about gravity or lightness or anti-gravity or inability to float.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: For someone who flies through their paintings, I could see why gravity would be the measure

there. [They laugh.]

APRIL GORNIK: You could liken it to scuba diving, I guess, or something like that, too.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Were those under-water paintings you did, were they also imagined? I mean, there was a time when you were doing paintings that were clearly submerged.

APRIL GORNIK: Both of those paintings, I took from like little dive guidebook images that I altered. I scanned them in, and I altered them quite a bit. But I didn't make up either of those, per se. I mean, the light I kind of partly made up because what I wanted to get was like—I just needed a sort of certain composition that would hold the weird light that you get under water. But those paintings are so difficult to paint because they are—it's very—it takes a really long time to get to the part where they have enough light that you feel like you're moving through them instead of just groping for it because they're just naturally more closed in.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Interesting.

APRIL GORNIK: That's not explained very well.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, but it's fascinating. It goes way back to what you said earlier about an area of interest in the painting, and your teacher told you, and you've been able to tell someone—I'm not suggesting those paintings don't have areas of interest. But is it that you're working as fast as you can to get to the point where you actually can get to that moment when the painting seems to move in, rather than it—

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. And you, of course, can't move any faster than you normally can. But it just felt a little more claustrophobic working on them till I could get them to that point. And then I was fine with them. But I haven't—I just did the two large ones and some small ones, and I haven't done any since then. I need to—I always need to feel a need to make something. You know, it would be fun to do more. But I would actually have to—I'd have to see it. I'd have to need it and see it, to a certain extent, before I would decide to make another one. But I don't think it's entirely out of—you know, it's not out of the running. It's definitely something I might go back to.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: One of the things that we've talked about before a little bit is this whole question of the double. And this seems like some people see this is as a kind of compositional strategy, the fact that there's so much twinning that's going on, and reflecting.

APRIL GORNIK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And you've had a poet friend do a poem that is in fact a kind of poem about a reflected landscape in that way. When did that first start, and why was that an appealing thing to you?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, the first image was from that trip to Arizona. And it was an image of two rocks that I saw in Lake Powell, which is—I'm sorry; you've heard this before. But it's—Lake Powell was flooded by damming that was done, probably a bad idea at this point—but in Northern Arizona. So it became a resort like. And when Eric and I were taking that trip around the Southwest in 1980, we stopped at Lake Powell, rented a little motorboat, and went out onto the lake. And it was—I remember well. It was like a lovely sunny afternoon. And at one point we'd gone out a ways and turned around. And a monster storm was coming up over the horizon. I mean, like really scary, kind of a swirling, you know, gyre-like storm. And so we started heading back to the marina, quickly.

And at one point we found ourselves lined up between these two rocks that were standing that must have been pinnacles on the desert floor, these two rocks that were sticking out of the lake. And I really went crazy with my camera and internally because I felt like I was looking at something that was extraordinarily meaningful to me, and took pictures and got really excited and thought a lot about it, actually, on the rest of the trip, too. And in painting that first painting, I thought about, you know, it being like a portal and twins. But I didn't have—do you need to fix something?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt, but I don't.

APRIL GORNIK: That's okay. And then, you know, would subsequently try to explain why I thought the image seemed meaningful. And in fact, it became a kind of—and I've mentioned this in lectures a lot. It became a kind of a reference point for an image that feels to me to have specific metaphorical weight, versus a kind of image that's like the painting that I did, either right before it or right after it. I can't recall the order—that was a painting from that spot that we stopped in the high desert that was so moving to me, where there was just this big, empty expanse. And all you see is light, and all you see is space. And it's transporting and has no metaphorical content at all, which I think is a kind of relief and a nice balance to the need for metaphorical content that I also seem to feel. There are poetic poles, I guess. And I mean, that also forms a twin.

So when I said that I had this printmaking teacher that used to talk about binary operations in art, I mean, I think that it's so true that most people find their edges as an artist. They find their edges. And usually, at least some point along, what could be an elaborate circle, there's kinds of diametric oppositions that form ways of thinking and reacting and feeling, even, even if it's not able to be articulated, that you work naturally between, because those form your boundaries and you need those kinds of edges to be able to move through your work in some way. As I said, I don't think it necessarily needs to be articulated. So that the twin and, I guess, yeah, reflections are a part of that. That's another kind of twinning, although I don't usually think of it like that. I think of that as just—I think of that kind of state as the state of groundlessness, kind of like the high desert where you're able to get into a point where the ground is subsumed by the water, and water subsumes the ground. So you're left with nothing, [laughs] this pleasant state of nothing.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Rather than two things, you're left with all one thing, which becomes nothing then in that sense.

APRIL GORNIK: One and one in that instance equals zero. And then in other cases, it equals more. And, you know, I've also noticed, like I keep doing these paintings that have like—I noticed this only a few years ago, that I was starting to use like images of trees. It started in—I don't know if this is the first painting or not, but the painting—the fall of 2001 that has the two trees in it in the field. It's kind of hotly colored, and then there's the blue sky behind. Those two trees for me also form a kind of Doppelgänger image. But also, it's—they also anchor space in a certain way. They start moving you back, without doing the whole literal indication of how far back you're supposed to go. But those things, twins in a certain way, too—and I'm finding myself doing that a lot in the paintings. Like two trees or two clumps of trees or that kind of demarcation has been popping up, too. So maybe the rocks are—have transformed into that. But they'll be back. They've been—they come back every now and then. [They laugh.]

[END TRACK AAA_gornik08_4119.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This is June 2, 2008. I'm at Sag Harbor, and this is the second tape with April Gornik for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

You know, one thing that I forgot to ask you before is, you dedicated one painting, *A Delicate Hour*, to your father.

APRIL GORNIK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And I wondered, why that particular painting?

APRIL GORNIK: I'm not sure. That was just really an intuitive thing. It's a two-rock painting, but the rocks were sort of far apart. And they're, you know, like really kind of overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the rest of the painting, the landscape. And it's dark and light. And I don't know. Somehow it reminded me of my father. I mean, I've had this friend—I have this friend who said, like, "Well, the two rocks could be your mother and father. Like they're not just a portal, they're not just, you know, two hands saying, 'Go no further.' They're not just a Doppelgänger." He was in Freudian therapy at the time, so it was quite understandable that he was thinking that. So then I thought, well—well, first I thought, like, oh no. And then later I thought, yeah, maybe he's right. I have no idea. But you know, there's two of them. So it's about, you know, it could be about me and dad. I have no idea. Or it could just be about distance itself, you know. Like you're there. It's another thing that's like you, but you can't ever get as close as you think you want to.

I mean, there are so many questions in the work that to me are like just the fundamental questions of—I probably don't know enough about this as a philosophy to be speaking about it intelligently—but what I imagine to be the fundamental tenets of existentialism, you know, just questions of like being and knowing if someone else is out there really, and knowing if anyone's communicating with you, or is anyone actually like you? Or you could say it's like Emily Dickinson, the same thing. But all of those things that you can pack into a painting and leave unanswered, it seems to me the fundamentals of contemplation. And that has to be the fundamentals of, you know, philosophy in general.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Are the paintings traces of those kinds of psychological inquiries for you? I mean, in the making of them, and then maybe more importantly, the ability to apprehend them when they're done, do you see reflections of those kinds of philosophical questions in the paintings?

APRIL GORNIK: Just intuitively. It's something that I read into the work after I'm done with it. I don't usually think about it when I'm doing it. I mean, what is there to think?

You know, I refer to these paintings as like contemplative objects. And I believe that they're contemplative objects, and I think that they function like that. But I really don't know, myself, when I'm—I guess it really is more Eastern, because it's not like contemplating with thoughts in mind, per se. It's contemplating with

conundrums or questions or mysteries or states that, you know, that leave you thoughtless, in a sense.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So it's dumb as a painter while you're making them, but smart as a painter after you've made them? [Laughs.]

APRIL GORNIK: Yep. No, it's dumb as a painter while you're making them, and then—you know, they're smarter than you. [Laughs.] In the end, leaving you dumb, or something. I don't know. I really don't know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You've talked about beauty. Is virtuosity important to you? I mean, the whole—you've been a painter now for—you've had a significant career for a considerable period of time. You're a better painter. This is a technical measure, as well as whatever else it may be. But does that matter to you, the gaining of knowledge about how to make a painting?

APRIL GORNIK: It does. I love to feel prideful about the way that I paint. But I'm so perpetually dissatisfied with it, it would be—it's kind of unimaginable to get the point where I'd actually think like, "Wow, good for you, April. You really nailed that one." I mean, there's—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Are you serious?

APRIL GORNIK: I mean, there's—yeah, there's parts of the painting that I think are good or well painted. But there's always things that annoy me about them, and there's always things that I could do so much better or I could do differently. Or if I only weren't myself, I'd do them in a different way altogether. And you know, just like this perpetual dissatisfaction that just seems to trail behind me like, you know, my shadow or something. It's kind of impossible to rid myself of that. But that's okay.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I'm surprised to hear you say that. Why not go back and fix them?

APRIL GORNIK: Because there's nothing—it works within the painting, the paintings themselves have their own resolution and their own set of limitations. And—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That they're inherent as if they were encoded DNA-wise, that they're there in the beginning and that you can't overcome that—

APRIL GORNIK: No, they're not there in the beginning. They're like what happens while you paint them. But then when the painting feels like it organically grows into the thing that it becomes, with you sort of, you know, alternately coaxing it along, fighting with it, you know, trying to make it happen, trying to show it where it should be going. Then once it's done, it has its own Gestalt. I really believe that. You know, you can feel a painting like come together and then be done. And there still can be points of the painting where—it's bigger than like, I didn't paint that rock well, or something. It's bigger than that kind of issue. It's like a whole kind of scope of imagined possibilities that I always feel beset by that I can only imagine that if I just keep painting, eventually I'll paint better.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting to hear you say—let me frame the question this way. If the painting is talking to you, it does what—and because you're such a reader and have so many friends who are writers, you must know this. Writers always tell me that at a certain point—especially, novelists—that the story takes over. More accurately, characters take over. Does that happen in the making of a painting, that the painting begins to, in one sense, direct its own destiny and that you're merely some kind of [inaudible] who's there recording that aspect of its making?

APRIL GORNIK: It feels like that. But it varies from painting to painting. I've had paintings that felt like they painted themselves, start to finish, that I hardly—like I just channeled it. And that's like a dream come true when that happens. It's not typical. But it—I'm usually not that unselfconscious. But it occasionally does feel like the paintings just sort of have their own velocity and direction and you're just sort of along, you know, nursing them into being or something. But by and large, it goes from anywhere between like a fascinating conversation to a dreadful fight. [Laughs.]

You know, like sometimes you just feel like it's you or the painting. And it can be pretty nasty. But it's not uninteresting, ever. It's always a challenge. I'm the sort of person that, when I begin a painting, I hate it usually, at the very beginning. I always under-paint. So I'm never that miserable when I'm just getting a painting going and I'm starting to under-paint it and I'm starting to kind of feel out the composition on the canvas and trying to imagine what needs to be underneath the whole thing, to make the rest of it be able to have a kind of a depth structure to work against. So that's always fine. And then I begin to fill it in, as it were, you know, to get the surface covered. And then I become increasingly annoyed and unhappy.

And then when the whole thing is on the canvas, more or less, and I'm starting to correct all the myriad of things that are wrong—and there's always like a zillion of them—then I get very, very happy and very excited to be in

that process. I really enjoy the feeling of moving from the palette and the colors back to the painting. I like that my eye will just automatically say, "This is wrong, that's wrong, fix this, fix that," and get me into a kind of a rhythm of attention that feels very trance-like and very satisfying. It's really fun. I love that part. But sometimes, it's just—a painting can be just very unusually difficult, for whatever reason. And I won't be having such a good time. If I'm really lucky, by the end of the painting, it will actually feel—speaking of characters taking over—it would be as if, you know, the characters like held hands and walked off and left you alone. [Laughs.]

The painting version of that is, you know, that you get the painting filled in. And I'll be going back and forth, from the palette to my eye to the painting, et cetera, correcting, correcting. And then at a certain point, I'll make a correction, step back, look at the painting, and it closes the door on me. And I can't get back into it. And it just feels that it's completed itself. And typically, it is done at that point. Occasionally, I would go back and then change, you know, some really little, minor adjustment or something, make a minor adjustment. But by and large, it does sort of declare itself, like removed from me in a certain way.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's interesting. You know when it's finished when—

APRIL GORNIK: There's a real partum there, if that's a word that can be used.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah. Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: And I like that phenomenon. I mean, it feels exciting, you know, to suddenly see thing like become complete and not have holes in it. You know, because seeing what's wrong with it constantly, it's almost as if there were gaps or holes, and all of a sudden the whole thing coalesces. And then it takes on—it's almost like a vibration or something. And it takes on like a kind of whole, a chord, you know, if you will. It's like all the notes are there, and it's all doing it at once. And it feels right. It's sort of like no intuition needed at that point. I'm sure it's all intuition. But it feels like it's declared itself apart from me. And that's very satisfying. But you don't always get that so clearly. And you don't always get—you know, as soon as I'm more wrong than I thought. But it's at least the intimation of it being really close to being done.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, it's in the making. Is it the problem of the painting half full or the painting half empty? Are you always looking at the things that are wrong in the painting for you? Or do you ever look at the things that are right and developed?

APRIL GORNIK: No. I'm always looking at the things that are wrong. I can't look at the things that are right until I look at the things that are wrong. Of course, there's the—I don't know if this is—you tell me if this is unique to painting or is indigenous to writing and other pursuits as well. But there's that beloved phenomenon when you're first starting a painting and you nail like some area of it and think, "That's good." You know, there's that kind of like secret pat on the back, keep going. I mean, you need moments like that to keep yourself going because it is hard. They're big, et cetera. It takes a lot of organization. But I'll do something, and I'll think like, "Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Now I've shown myself, actually. I can kind of paint." And of course, invariably, that's the last thing that has to go. So the thing that you were the most—of which you were the most fond is the thing that you have to destroy, towards the end. That happens a lot. And I've said that to people before, and they just laugh, other artists, you know, because everybody knows that phenomenon. I know it's not unique to me.

And I guess that's just developmental. You know, you're getting something, you're getting something going. And what seemed to you like a kind of a finality, a kind of an accomplishment, becomes merely a step in the whole process. You'd wanted to think it was, you know, more like an accomplishment and it wasn't. It was just like—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The step necessary for you to go on to make the painting, it seems like—I mean, in a way it sacrifices itself in the making.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. Yeah, I know. It sacrifices itself. [They laugh.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's that rite of spring thing that happens when you're doing painting.

APRIL GORNIK: Exactly.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Something, some maidens go to get sacrificed and some don't.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. Right.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Speaking of maidens, we've talked before about a perception I had about your paintings, that they seem very—I'm going to say female and sexy, not feminist or anything like that. Have you thought much about the whole gendering of your paintings and how it plays out into that larger and contentious area of who makes paintings and are they different if you're a man or a woman?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, I had a very long meditation on that for several years. And this was now several years ago.

Maybe about 10 years ago, actually, was when I was trying to puzzle this out because I had done a series of waterway drawings. And it actually had not begun as a series at all. I'd done an image, drawn an image that was like a path of water that led directly from—almost the near center of the foreground back to the horizon of a small field. And the back of the field was flanked with trees. And I was interested in that image because it seemed like a path and it also seemed like a waterway or a body, river, something like that, something riverine. But it was too small to really be a path. And it was definitely too small to be a real river. And it was too watery to be a path. And there were all these contradictions in it, which really pleased me. I thought, "What an interesting and odd thing." And then, besides the fact of it being a kind of a fundamentally unstable element and therefore an interesting element to me in the painting, it also began in the foreground and led directly to the horizon. And I liked the way that it just neatly and unashamedly just sort of broke up the picture. It connected it and broke it up at the same time. So that fascinated me. I liked the direction of it.

I'd done that drawing in 1993. And I think it was in 1995—like it was a year and a half or two years later that I was looking at it in some form, like a photograph or a slide or on the computer or something and thought to myself, "Now, that's an interesting image. Why didn't I pursue that?" And then I decided—it bothered me. It sort of stuck in my craw. And I thought, "I have to do something about this image." But because I hate to make variations on a theme, truly hate it, I thought, I'm not going to draw another drawing that's like this one, per se. That just—I just don't like that technique. I mean, I know that there have been many beautiful works of art that have been produced from someone drawing something and then making a little change or adding a figure or a tree, or whatever, and then coming up with all sorts of great stuff. But for some reason, that really more than doesn't appeal to me. [Laughs.]

So I was taking a shower. And all of a sudden, I thought to myself, "Oh, wait. I know what I can do. What's wrong with me? I'm an artist. I'll just imagine what's—what goes—where that path of water goes on the other side of the horizon." And so I just sat down. And even though I was using a computer a lot of the time, I wanted to do this in drawing. So I sat down, and I just imagined the waterway on the other side of the horizon. And it looked quite different. And then I made another one. And then I actually started incorporating some photographs and doing more kinds—like using them to like get at these other places that I thought it was going. And some of them were quite different, one from the other.

Anyway, when a bunch of these drawings were completed, I realized I had a kind of a series. And I was sort of excited because it was a series that didn't feel like mere variations. It felt like my own kind of peculiar way of doing that. And I showed them at the gallery at a show in ninety-maybe-six [1996] or something like that. And people—two—at least two men came up to me during the show and said, "I like these drawings, but I think they are so sexual." And one of them said, "They're so sexual I wouldn't hang it in my house." And I thought, "Whoa. This is"—I mean, this is a highly unexpected reaction. Now, for all the years I've been making landscapes, I've been thinking that there is sexuality in them, sensuousness, sexuality. I mean, it's—I mean, you know, I take my pick when I'm giving a talk, whether I will say sexual or sensual. I sort of like try to scope out what the audience can handle.

But you know, there's all sorts of things about my work that to me feel like myself as a sexual being. And I mean, I can think of many, many examples. The moon, a certain kind of voluptuousness of water and land, or—I mean, just all sorts of things. Permeability is—but that's where I ended up thinking about this; I'll get to that later. So then I started thinking hard about this. And I started thinking, "Do I want these works to be seen as being sexual, one; do I like the idea of being referred to as vaginal images, because that's what, of course, was the first word that came up and stuff. And I actually started to people about it, you know, as, "What do you think of these drawings? Do you think they're this? Do you think they're that?" I think pretty much everyone agreed that there was—it was a kind of vaginal imagery. But in a sense, even though I understood that, I also found it too restrictive. Like I didn't want that water path, about which I'd had so many other associations, to be narrowed down to, This is some woman making pictures of her vagina in a landscape, or whatever, however that could be said.

And I started asking—I brought this up at talks. And you know, just like kind of to ask people for their reaction because I was curious. I needed to do a little research on this. And I was looking for a word that could seem as kind of powerful and dynamic as phallic, but could be referred to my sexuality as a woman. I didn't really come up with that. Some people said yonic, which just sounds weird to me. Someone suggested Gornik, which I thought was sort of fun. [They laugh.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It didn't sound so weird.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, it kind of confused me for a second, but I took it as a compliment. And et cetera. So—and I was talking to my shrink at the time, at one point. And I was complaining about this and how I was having this quest and reconsideration. And she said, "Well, did you ever think that maybe we have to think about why vaginal seems like such an awkward word and why it has that connotation? Is there any way of like kind of reversing that?" And you know, that really made sense to me, as like, wait a minute, maybe I need to think

about the way that I think about this, not just the way that it's generally appraised societally. And so then I noticed that I'd actually gone on from those drawings to make waterfall paintings.

And the funny thing about the waterfall paintings, because they are waterfalls that are contained by the land around them, is that as I was painting them, it took me until the second painting—and it takes me a couple of months to do a painting, so it took me several months to realize that they were also these same kind of images. I hadn't even thought about it. It was just all kind of naturally occurring art phenomenon—phenomena that happened, to any artist, I'm sure, in their studio. So, and then there's also the question of like—for years when I was in school, particularly, and then immediately out of school, I really resented the idea—and I think this is generational for me—of being considered a woman artist. It seemed like a kind of ghetto-izing, like, "Why don't I want to be a woman artist?"

And by the way, I saw Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* recently at the Brooklyn Museum. And that is one really silly work of art. I mean, it just—I'm sorry. Emily Dickinson's plate made me want to like break it fast. It's just so reduced. It's such a reductio ad, I don't even know if absurdum is a kind enough word. It's so miserably reduced. So—but I've since all of this, decided that, yes, my work is female. Yes, it absolutely expressed my own sexuality. Yes, these are my landscapes. And of course, they are particularly female in some way. What does that mean to the culture at large? Is it visible more to some people than others? Do people knowing that I'm a woman see the work differently than if they thought I were a man? I have no idea. I just don't know. But I do feel sure that a lot of the strength in them is because of my femaleness.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yes.

APRIL GORNIK: And I've definitely come to be comfortable with that. Of course, now, if you're a woman artist, it's like the whole playing field is so evened out. It's great. But it wasn't like that when I was just getting out of school and feminism was more of an issue. And it definitely was for me. And so it's funny to be at an age where looking back, I realize that I'm a generation that had this other set of attitudes about sexuality and gender, and that, you know, it's great now that—I'm assuming that girls don't have this kind of worry or anxiety or something about being perceived as female.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting to think of those, the waterways drawings, because when I first saw them, I don't know that I'm any more or less a sexual being than anybody else. They were unmistakably sexual, and exciting paintings for that reason because they seemed powerful and strong and unhesitating and they weren't apologetic about anything; yet they were beautiful drawings. I mean, they were about making the marks. I remember when we first talked about it, I was surprised at, as you said then, that you didn't realize that that was a way that they could be read, that that wouldn't have been obvious because it—

APRIL GORNIK: It just wasn't the first thing I thought about. As I said, I mean, I was no stranger to thinking about my work in terms of an expression of that. But I just wasn't focused on those as being more particularly an expression than other things. Which either means that I'm incredibly, like, deep into my work, a; b: extraordinarily naive about it; or, c, maybe the whole thing seems like a big sexual enterprise to me, so it didn't seem out of the ordinary. I kind of think it might be the latter because, you know, for me, working at all feels like, you know—light to me seems incredibly sensual, ergo, sexual. The land—I mean, the way I think about manipulating masses of land, masses of clouds—it's all, to me, like this very, very, very physical expression. And how could that be about anybody but me?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: If it's that visceral, obviously it's visceral at every level of mark-making, then it's not something that you do, you suddenly bring in. You don't bring in the visceral side if you're bringing it at a certain point.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's just, it's there. It's resident.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. Yeah, I think so. And I don't know. What were you—were you going to say something?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: No, no. I mean, this painting that you're working on now—again, it seems incredibly sexy.

APRIL GORNIK: This painting is done.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: That painting is done.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's the—and it's not obvious. But the folds of water, which are frozen, and the way that you get over extended time-lapse photograph, almost, it's like frozen with a long exposure, I'm

seeing clearly sexual. They're labial. And it becomes a kind of a sexy painting that's moving towards us. I mean, you would be aware of that fairly—

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: But it just seems like that's the way water mostly always seems to me.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Laughs.] Okay.

APRIL GORNIK: I mean, seriously, I don't mean to sound like some naive person or trying to push this. But I love to swim. I love water. I love water in a certain way.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: I don't know.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: It seems like—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It may be the society's hangup in having to get you to declare what is inherently a part of your being. I mean, maybe that's just the problem. In fact, it's not a problem at all.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You start—to go back to—

APRIL GORNIK: You know, I think I'm—maybe I'm polymorphic perverse in a way, when it comes to landscapes. [Enright laughs.] And it has something to do with that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You started drawing in '84, don't you, seriously?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What made you—why did drawing become part of the repertoire of image-making for you?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, because I had taken printmaking and I really liked etching, and I love the blacks that you can get in paper that has had ink embedded in it, black ink embedded in it, I always thought it would be nice to be able to get some sort of drawing media going that could give me that kind of satisfaction of absolute black and absolute paper-white. So I was—I fooled around with a bunch of different—pencil is obviously out. I didn't even try with that. But I did try doing some ink drawings, and I did some watercolors. But when I started using charcoal, which I really hadn't done in school—I was never particularly attracted to it and didn't do it much except for in life-drawing classes occasionally. But when I started trying to draw these landscape-type images, using charcoal and black pastel—that was the first combo I used—I suddenly saw the potential for getting those kinds of blacks and getting that kind of density. And then once I did, I started to see drawings the way, you know, I sometimes see a painting coming up. So I began kind of with this parallel course of working on charcoal drawings. Now I mostly used like harder and softer and blacker, versus harder and softer and blacker charcoal. So I'll under-draw with a charcoal that's grayer and harder. And then I'll work up to the black, which tends to be its final form. And I've been doing a lot of backlit tree drawings lately. That's actually been going on for several years. And I really haven't quite understood that whole thing.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Now, what do you mean?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, I don't have like a story about it. I don't have a story. It's not like a two-rocks thing. It's like, backlit trees: What can you say about them? You know, it's a world. It's a—you know, I don't—I'm curious why people love trees so much. They do. People just are crazed about trees. They just seem to think they're like—maybe they feel like other people to them. Maybe they feel like personages. Maybe they feel like orderly crowds. I'm not sure, but people really respond to trees. And I don't know what that's about. But I respond to them architecturally, and I respond to light behind them. And I think that maybe it has something to do with—it seems like sort of an ultra-satisfying condition if you're using black charcoal and white paper and you're talking about it the way I am, where you end up with the black, and the white of the paper becomes the light. So you get this kind of natural dynamism. And it then ending up with a black tree that's more or less in shadow, ends up being like a kind of a naturally dynamic vehicle for that kind of light to happen.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It has a—I mean, because your interest is in light, in some ways, the drama of light then gets

exacerbated in the drawing in that way, because you get such a strong sense, especially the way you work. If you put the black on last and it's more layered, if that's the right word to use, obviously it has an almost tromp l'oeil effect. And a lot of your trees almost pop out of the world, so that the light, it's backlit. You get the emanation of light, but then you have this thing that you're also looking through to get to that light. So it just becomes extremely dramatic.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah, it does. And stark, to a certain extent, gently stark.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah. A bit more, not—they're not Gothic, but they shift—you talk about the ominous quality of beauty. And in some ways, your tree drawings can often be ominously beautiful.

APRIL GORNIK: When you said "Gothic," I immediately thought of stained light, like light coming through. [Laughs.]

Rather than the way you were using "Gothic." But yeah, I know what you mean. You know, I'm just going to keep drawing them until I understand them better and get sick of them. But the ones where it's like the woods, whole like woods—they're really exhausting to do. So I have to have a lot of energy.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Why? Because there are so many components?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. They're really hard to do. It's hard to like—it's hard to keep the energy in balance. It's hard to keep—you know, within a drawing or a painting, you always have to maintain your energy level at a very, very high state. Otherwise, you're just going to be—end up—you know, and you still will anyway—but maybe even more so, end up having to correct huge amounts of it. And then with drawing, you can't make that many mistakes because you can't really erase. You can blot a little bit. You can blot off a little bit of charcoal, but you can't really erase anything. So it's like it takes a high level of attention to get it organized. And then when there's so much detail, in order to get it to have a kind of an over-arching structure, I find that makes it more difficult, having that amount of detail to juggle as you're watching it take shape.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: To go from the intense drama and the black-and-whiteness in the sense of the drawings to a painting like *Light on Water*, which is one of the paintings of yours in which it's the closest you get, in a way, to Monet to the fact that the painting almost disappears. It's such a delicate, extraordinary painting.

APRIL GORNIK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I'm fascinated by that painting. What made you make a painting of such delicate, almost insubstantiality? It's so atmospheric, that painting. It's more like Turner than anything you've ever done.

APRIL GORNIK: It's just another edge. It's just part of the—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The edge of not being there then?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. It's just like a natural edge, like that you'd paint a painting that's very, very, very, very dark or something like that. And then that one is—I mean, the darkness—the darkness in a painting can seem like it's about to consume itself. But for a little light that's left in that instance, the lightness of that painting is consuming itself until there's almost no definition left.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

APRIL GORNIK: It just seems like another way of that happening. And that painting was something that I actually saw when I was on a boat out in the sea. And so I had a photograph. But what I was trying to paint was how densely contained the light was in the air around the light that was reflected on the water. So it wasn't just about leaving the light reflections, it was about painting the containment of light in the water and then in the sky, that was all being kind of held in kinds of moisture, in one instance water, in another a very moisture-laden sky.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The particles are weighty, then, in that sense?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. So it was an interesting little paradox painting to do, because there's a lot of paint on that painting. Even though it's a simple image, it couldn't be painted simply. It has a lot of layers, that one. So—and I guess it is kind of a—you know, one of those edges, one of those nth degrees.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Those aren't edges that you—you don't cultivate them. I mean, you're not moving towards them. You find them because they're necessary?

APRIL GORNIK: They just pop up. You know, it's—I don't think that there's any—it's not a straight line. If it's anything, it's probably like a sphere or something like that. And there could be an edge on any surface of that

sphere that could represent a point that you needed to reach, that I need to reach, but didn't know was there or that ends up representing—that maybe I haven't done its opposite at some point. It's perhaps not even necessary to do it. But—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Another thing I wanted to talk about in this round is, the other way that you kind of feed your head—I think of all the painters that I've talked to over 25 years now. You may be the best read or the most literate or the one who, it seems, that writing—

APRIL GORNIK: Me?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah. It seems that writing and language—

APRIL GORNIK: Seems impossible.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, trust me on this one. Somehow, writing everything from prose to poetry seems to be something that you gravitate towards. Do you know—I mean, other than the enjoyment of it, is it something that does feed your imagination and is somehow infiltrating your dreams? And it's not that it works itself out directly on the surface of your paintings, but it must be there somewhere.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, there have been paintings that I've done from reading material. One of the first paintings that I did—the first painting that I did from something that I read was from reading *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon, and there's this image of the sun rising and casting a shadow over a mountain before itself. And that, to me, naturally led to trying to make up this painting that was about a shadow that was cast from the foreground to the horizon, which actually relates to the waterway drawings. And the painting is evenly—not evenly, but is divided between like the ground being lit brightly and the rest of it being in shadow. And then there's a kind of a stormy sky behind it, which I think was probably necessary just to contain that thing that was happening. So that was one instance. And then there have been several other paintings, not always so literal. I was painting a painting of the moon, a little bit of waves in the middle of the ocean, and then some wave action against rocks in the foreground. This is a very tall painting. I think it's like eight or nine feet tall. It's really tall. It's 111 inches, I think.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Is that the Munchian painting, the painting that reminds me more of Munch than anything you've ever done? Somehow it has a slightly—

APRIL GORNIK: I don't know. It's dedicated to this guy, Robert Stone, who wrote a bridge called *Outerbridge Reach*. And the book—I was reading it more or less at the same time. And I was starting to have my first intimations of middle age. And the book is really like a terrifying journey into middle age, or into death, or death as the subject of middle age. And in the book, the protagonist finds himself out alone in the ocean. And he's embarked on an around-the-world race that he has no business entering. And it's in this state of bravado and derring-do and terror and stupidity and all sorts of factors. And as I was painting the painting, I realized that I was coming up with this light and this atmosphere and this feeling that was directly related to the book. I mean, the book was so in my soul as I was painting it. So that's why I made the dedication. And it's—I've always liked that painting. It's just about how far away the moon is and those other elements of the painting are. Everything is so far away.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So literature, in fact, has fed you directly. Is there another way in which it's part of—is it just that you have an active imagination, that you need to feed your head with things more than just coming to the studio and making marks on the surface?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, I always—I also like to learn things all the time. I'm easily bored. So I like to have lots and lots of stimulation. So I like to read things. I always like to have a book going. And I also like to read science books, and I like to read books about a huge variety of topics—history, you name it. And then—but that just seems like a normal thing that any person would do, given the opportunity, to have all this stuff around them. Who wouldn't want to like read everything they could get their hands on and learn all this stuff? Because it's more fun than anything else. I guess maybe I'm a natural learner or something. But I really, really enjoy finding out about the world, from different points of view. I like being proved wrong. I like reading things and then realizing that there's an entirely different way of looking at something, be it, I don't know, relationships or science or anything. I like that kind of surprise.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Why does painting still matter to you so much? You still do it. You do it with as much passion as you always did, maybe more. What is so persistent about it?

APRIL GORNIK: I can answer that easily. It's so easy. Because nothing can do what painting does. I haven't found anything that remotely resembles it. And I've often talked about this in terms of the computer, which, you know, I love and use a lot. And it's a great sketch tool, even though it's only a sketch tool. But the more I've used that and the more images that I've looked at, the more I find, where I'm in my studio working or when I go to the Met

or another museum and I look at real paintings, name me something else that's made in the world that actually contains the kind of intensity of information and time and thought and poetry and struggle and decision and indecision, and change and growth and despair and complexity that one painting can contain and convey back to the viewer. It makes this extraordinary circuit of recognition on the part of the viewer. And then there is what's in the painting. And then there is what the artist intended. And I believe that all of that is visible. So paintings literally contain worlds of information in a way that other things don't. And a great painting doing that is, you know—it goes without saying, one of the greatest experiences you can have. So the thought of being able to make a really great painting is a big impetus. [Laughs.] It hasn't abated.

But, you know, there's nothing else like that. I mean, music is a wonderful experience, but is an entirely different experience of it. It won't sit still for you. And certainly, sculpture is like that, too. There's oftentimes that, you know, the indirection of it being cast; drawings as well. But there's something about paint, you know. And I think that partly it's just its own history that also comes into the mix when you're looking at a painting, all the paintings that you've seen, all the ways in which you've familiarized yourself with—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Painting is so deeply implicated in the history of its previous making, isn't it, that it's—I mean, that's the inescapable thing that you bring along with you every time you look at that surface.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You're not just looking at that surface.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. But it's—you know, and the fact, as we were saying before, that you can look at a painting and see where an artist was like so deeply engaged in it. So—or, you know, if you're looking at, say, a student's work or something, and they got tired and they let it go and they painted—they let that bad part stay in their painting anyway—that's equally obvious. So obviously, if you get somebody who's like ultra-there and has made this thing in a state of absolute attention, I mean, in a way that's like a formula for revelation. Think about it. I mean, what else is like—I shouldn't say this because I don't do it. But my imagination is that when you're meditating, you're in this state of absolute awareness and no awareness at all, like both at once. And when you look at a painting that moves you, you don't sit there and dissect it. You have the experience of it. And you're getting that artist's absolute attention and no attention at all, because all of that has gone into becoming an object, and the object can't have attention, but it somehow contains it. So you're getting this extraordinary moment, this extraordinary interface of like a real person's life and consciousness and the history of itself and yours, like making this. So wasn't that easy to answer? [They laugh.] So, of course. What is more interesting than that? It's like—what?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This is one of the great responses of the—that's—they've got to hear that.

[END TRACK AAA_gornik08_4120.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: We're recording now. Oh, really bad, holy mackerel. I'm sorry—supposed to be professional. All right.

APRIL GORNIK: That will be a nice little thing for them to have. [Laughs.] I'm so smart.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Who is that idiot?

APRIL GORNIK: If I'm so smart—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I have to—ignore what you've just heard—even your lies. [They laugh.]

This is Tuesday, June 3rd. I'm Robert Enright in Sag Harbor, New York, interviewing landscape painter, April Gornik, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is day two, session three.

APRIL GORNIK: Oh.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What?

APRIL GORNIK: Before you begin—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What?

APRIL GORNIK: You know, when I was waking up this morning I thought of two things that I wanted to say, as per our conversation yesterday. Is that okay?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Let's start with them.

APRIL GORNIK: One is that, you know, you were asking me about, do I ever go back in and change paintings?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: Which, you know, typically I don't. But there have been occasions where I have, like even after a couple of years, changed a painting. It's rare, but those times do exist. And what I felt I was responding to about was about seeing things that I'm not painting well enough and then thinking of going back and repainting a whole painting later, which I never do.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Right.

APRIL GORNIK: But just for the record, I mean, there are paintings that I've like gone back into years later. In fact, the first time I used a computer to work with an image, I actually had scanned an image of a photograph of a painting into my computer, and I was putting it into my little archive that I have on my computer, that I was forming at that time on a computer. And I had scanned the image in. And I looked at it, and I thought, this is so wrong. And then I just sort of accidentally or intuitively or playfully started horsing around with in Photoshop. And that's what really started me on that. But I ended up repainting that painting. And there have been several that I've radically changed. There have also been paintings that I've changed—you know, you don't see it in my painting technique. You don't see that kind of alteration because I'm not interested in showing that to the viewer. So—but there are paintings that I've started with an radically, like moved the horizon line in a 12-foot painting up or down, three inches, or an inch and a half, or something, because I had to.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So pentimento would reveal in some cases, then, some significant adjustments in the composition?

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, sure, yeah, definitely. And many not so significant, but just, you know, for the record, I didn't want you to think that every painting that I've ever done has always remained exactly the same, because I have reworked paintings, even as much as a couple of years later. But I do recognize that there's a point at which I make something within the limits of my own ability and that, unless—if I really wanted to repaint that painting with what I know now or the way I think I can paint now, I would just repaint a new painting with that as a basis.

And that brings me—in fact, thinking about that made me think that—think about talking about the two rocks and images that I revisit, the second thing that I wanted to mention is that—I don't even know if I should say this. But it seemed like an interesting thought at the time. And of course, this is like just upon waking, which sometimes you're wrong about that. But I started to think, what a strange thing it is, the way that certain motifs—which could seem like compositional devices or something, but to me they feel more like themes or things that I've never quite figured out—will reappear in my work.

And I started to think, it's kind of like open-ended equations and fractals. You know the whole principle of self-similarity and the kinds of repetition of organization that will occur in a fractal pattern is based on an open-ended equation. And until computers were around, where scientists could run equations like this through a computer long enough, they never noticed that there was any coalescing of that kind of attempted symmetry and explanation into a kind of order; but in fact, those things do occur. And it accounts for growth, and it accounts for organization, and it accounts for complexity in organization. And I was thinking I wonder if there is—I actually don't know if I should be saying this, as I said, or if it really is something that could be applied to painting. But the way that things will revisit themselves in my life, the way it almost feels like points of order that emerge within this long range of activity that feels oftentimes and mostly chaotic, but then will sort of sort itself out into something that feels—it feels organized. And it feels necessary. It feels like a point of clarity that still retains all the complexity and the mystery and the confusion and fascination that it held for me at the beginning.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You know, I think of strange attractors and I think of the idea that there are things in the paintings that have this resonance that is both uneasy and remarkable and compelling.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: They seem to operate in that wide spectrum of reaction for the viewer. And I guess they must for you as a maker, too.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, that's another term from chaos theory and, you know, the study of fractals and fractal behavior and all of that stuff. Sometimes it bugs me when artists sound like, you know, want-to-be lay scientists. So that's why I kind of hesitated to say this. But I do think it's quite interesting, the way that in one's life work something will come back that needs to be revisited. And of course, there's probably good psychological reasons for that as well. But certainly, in the process of painting, it feels like something that's not unlike that theory.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It's interesting. When we talked yesterday about the painting you

dedicated to your father, you said it might be that the two—

[Telephone rings.]

[END TRACK AAA_gornik08_4121.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Okay.

APRIL GORNIK: You were talking about—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yes. The painting that you dedicated in a sense to your father—

APRIL GORNIK: *A Delicate Hour*?

ROBERT ENRIGHT:—when you were talking about maybe the two presences in it were your mother and father, maybe your father and you. And it led me to think that in some ways, the question of psychological presences intimates the idea of there being human presences in the painting. And yet you have consistently, throughout your painting career, stayed away from putting man or woman in the paintings. And I wonder what that decision has been about.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, you know, the initial thing that I thought about—and this is, again, retroactive to doing it. Like I mean, I just thought, well, I'm making landscapes. And my most basic thought was, I'm making landscapes, so there aren't people in it because they're landscapes. The end, you know, that simple.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Tell that to Poussin.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. [They laugh.]

And then the more I thought of it, the more I realized that in fact, if there is people in a painting, in whatever scale or size, then it indicates a dimension for the viewer of how big they are in relation to the painting. And it also indicates a certain kind of emotional response that the viewer should have. I've said many times that, even if I put a stick figure into the painting, no matter how simply it's drawn, people are such that they will project into the work and they'll project first into the person that's represented in the image. And that will clue them in as to what their emotional state might be like. Should they be sympathetic to that person? Should they identify with him or her? And then how big is the rest of the space that they're in in relation to that little or big figure? And that's something that I definitely realized, again retroactively, that I wanted to avoid. I wanted to avoid giving the viewer some sense of that, because I like the idea of a person being able to project into my paintings—which I know they'll do because people always project into the surface of a painting—without any kind of guidance, without any kind of direction, so that they'll be as free as possible to have as many interpretative reactions as possible and as many emotional reactions as possible. And were there people, I think that that would definitely change everything.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And people often, as well, clearly, in some senses insinuate some kind of narrative complexity that—and I'm not suggesting that one doesn't read story into your works as well. I think that probably happens. But the figure complicates or maybe narrows down the narrative; I don't know.

APRIL GORNIK: I would call it narrow down. But you know, because then it becomes a story about a person in a landscape, rather than the fact or the drama of light. And you know, so much of what I think is an emotional presence in these paintings, just by dint of them being landscapes with space, is—maybe this isn't a matter-of-fact thing, but to me it seems very matter of fact—is that to me those elements, I equate with longing. And I think that longing is such an essential part of the human condition. You know, longing to be alone, longing to be with someone, longing to have enough space, longing to feel contained by something—you know, all of those paradoxes are what another thing that for me landscape says the best. So there's some element there, too. And if there's another person in the painting, then you're watching their drama and their reaction to the circumstance, and not just having your own.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And it also obviously gets in the way. You talk of your paintings as being objects of contemplation. And you can certainly—if you insert the figure into the landscape, then that dissipates that possibility of that contemplative possibility, I would think, in lots of ways.

APRIL GORNIK: To me, it would. But you know, for other people, I'm sure that's not the case. But that's the way I see the world. You know, these are obviously like my visions of what makes sense to me.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's interesting. You mentioned yesterday the word "poetics" a lot. And everybody from Meeka Walsh to Susan Wheeler, a lot of people have written about you also invoke poets, all the way from their own work to Catullus, which interests me a lot. But what fascinates me about your use of the term "poetics" is you seem to be taking for granted some kind of integral relationship between the poetics and a kind of painterly

aesthetics. And I wonder how you view poetic operating in the landscape itself. Is that a condition that you understand intuitively or emotionally?

APRIL GORNIK: I've never thought about that. I've never thought about needing to define that for myself. It just seems like—I guess I've been operating on the assumption that personal expression or the attempt at personal expression necessarily involves poetry, and then without that, you're not really personally expressing yourself. So to me, it seems like so basic a thing that's a part of this whole enterprise, I've never even questioned that. But that's a damn good question. Can I get back to you on that? [Laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, sure. But you know, poesis, the idea of the classics thought of the seven arts. They were sisters, and poetry and painting were very close. And one in verbal terms did what the other did in visual terms, and they were always intersecting. So there is a kind of pedigree for talking about the poetics of painting. And I just wondered, you tend not to be theory based in the way you operate. And this is an old, old theory, if it's even that. So I just wondered if it had occurred to you in those particular terms, in thinking back through classicism.

APRIL GORNIK: In a sense. Yes, in the sense that, you know, I've likened my painting process to fiction because I think of it as being matter of fact and descriptive and relatively unembellished, not that prose can't be purple and not that painting can't be, too. But just in the sense of describing something, that that has some link to fiction. And yet, I feel like the—what I'm asking of myself and the viewer lies more—in terms of interpretation, lies more in the realm of poetry because poetry is that thing that summarizes without explanation, and that that's what a good poem always is and that's what a good painting always is. And I always say great art makes itself vulnerable to interpretation. And I think that that's true of poetry. This is not to say that fiction doesn't work in the same way. But there's something about the length of time it takes to read a poem and the enormity of the impact of it within that often small, manageable scale, and the fact that you can stand in front of a painting and take it all in that seem, almost on a physical level, similar. Whereas, if you're reading a novel, you know, whether it's 200 or 900 pages, there's still a kind of an experience that's involved that's more to me like music because it takes you longer to arrive at that same place. And you arrive at it differently. And I think that the experience is necessarily a little different for that reason. So poetry and painting have always seemed more alike to me for that reason.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That makes sense, actually. You've worked largely with the same medium for a long time. And I wonder what it is about what you paint with and on that is interesting to you.

APRIL GORNIK: Oil paint?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And linen.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, the linen—the linen came about. I'd been painting on canvas for a long time and then realized—I guess it was in the late '80s, towards the late '80s—that I was starting to make enough money that I could hire an assistant. But then, it also occurred to me that I could, with the same amount of money, pretty much, start buying preprimed linen canvas. And that seemed like a more attractive notion, plus the fact that I don't like having people around me when I'm working. So I started working with pre-primed linen at that time for that reason. And the oil paint? I just think the colors of oil paint are more beautiful than the colors of acrylic paint. They just—the pigment seems to—pigment suspended in oil seems more rich and fabulous and various than the kinds of pigments which I guess are maybe a little more synthetic, in the case of acrylics, suspended in water. But I mean, I've seen some really good acrylic-wielding painters. But I—for me, oil paint is just more satisfying. And I like the different times that various pigments will take to dry. I love-hate the way that they'll dry on a canvas when you're working them and then change color while it's kind of sucking into the canvas. Then you have to like pull them back out by, you know, putting some glazing medium on them, or whatever. It's kind of fascinating to me. They're very alive that way.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And also, there is—is it part of the romance of the past, too? I mean, oil painting, after, is the—that's where it comes from. Or that hasn't occurred to you that—

APRIL GORNIK: I guess so. But mostly, I just like the way that the colors look better in oil paint. I don't think it's anything really more elaborate than that. I can oftentimes tell if a painting is painted in acrylic or oil. But I've rarely been surprised by finding out that a painting was acrylic instead of oil.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: In the studio right now, you've got smaller paintings around and five large paintings as well. Are they good companions for you when you're working? Do you like having other of your work around when you're working on specific paintings?

APRIL GORNIK: I do. Not forever, but I definitely do. And if I start selling work and too much of it leaves the studio at once, I can get a little identity critical [they laugh] when I feel like there's too much of me missing in the studio. So I'm particularly happy when I have a lot of work around. It makes me feel whole in some way.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's interesting. I mean, are they talking to you while—I mean, yesterday you were working on this canvas I'm looking at right now. You know, there are four other finished canvases. When you take a break, will you look back and be spoken to by your earlier work?

APRIL GORNIK: I tend not to do that. I mean, I'll glance at it. But often—usually, not, I have to say, because typically if I'm looking to a painting that I have recently or previously finished for help with a painting that I'm working on right now, I'm in bigger trouble than I realize. And that's not a good sign. So if I find myself doing that, I won't let myself do that anyway. It's just—they're just kind of presences. It's just nice to have them around. And I like to see how they wear on me, too. I like to see if they continue to look strong. And, you know, occasionally I'll make like some little minor change or something on one, if I find my eye keeps being drawn to one spot or something like that and I realize there's something that's not quite right. But mostly I just like the companionship, I guess. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Donald Kuspit said the most interesting thing in one of his essays on you. He talked about that you've painted the most discreetly surrealist paintings ever made. And the question of Surrealism is an interesting residue somewhere in the work. And it largely comes out in the fires. As early as 1983 you did *Twin Fires*, and then more recently, the landscape which has those sort of dots of fire all around.

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That is almost a Surrealistic trope, in a sense.

APRIL GORNIK: It is. It is. It is, definitely. I mean, I consider that one of those conversation dichotomies that occur for me within the work, the difference between the painting being simply natural and having a Surrealistic element. I once declared that—in the late '80s I once declared that my paintings were becoming emotionally dramatic, and I was not going to be doing any more paintings that had any kind of surreality to them. I felt that I was witnessing this, you know, a change, a movement, a growth, or something in my work. And it only took like a couple of months to find myself painting like this completely surreal water spout that was stuck in the middle of a lake that didn't make any sense. But I had to paint it, and made a liar out of me for having made that declaration. So after that, I tried to avoid making statements like that because, clearly, it might take me a long time to swing back to a need for that kind of expression, but it does consistently happen. So I can't trust myself to think, you know, I'm this or I'm that kind of painter or self-expresser or something.

But the surreal paintings are—it's very interesting. I love surreal work, although my favorite kind of surrealism would be someone like Charles Burchfield, where you just get this absolutely wacky kind of sense of animation going on in the landscape and in the world around you that seems utterly true. And without being at that edge of Surrealism, that kind of voracity couldn't be expressed. So you need Surrealism in order to do it. Plus, you know, I was saying yesterday that I worked from dreams for such a long time. And there was a point at which I started to feel like, "Oh, woe is me. I'm dreaming landscapes less." But I did notice more or less simultaneously that the world around me was looking stranger and stranger. [Laughs.]

So I no longer feel woeful about that, because more things typically look more amazing to me in the normal—so-called normal outside world, anyway. So there's been a kind of a replacement of that. So, surreal, natural—and then there have been paintings that I have done from something that I absolutely saw that felt like pretty naturalistic that everyone who sees them thinks they're very surreal, and other paintings that I've just simply made up that people think look very natural, but in fact I know are more imagined, more technically surreal. So I mean, that's such a waivery, untrustworthy line.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Right. If you're talking about Burchfield, of course, if that's an aspect of Surrealism, it's a Surrealism more in the American grain than the classic European notion of invoking, you know, dissecting tables and umbrellas and all that kind of stuff.

APRIL GORNIK: [Inaudible] and stuff.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The classic definition from Lautreamont of what Surrealism is. That doesn't interest you very much, obviously?

APRIL GORNIK: I have to say it doesn't. I mean, I think that a lot of those paintings are clever. But they rarely make a believable enough situation for me to go deeply into them. They kind of stop me at my head. So I don't enjoy the experience of looking at them as much as some other things.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I'm interested in sky renderers. And I was thinking about your work. I think of everybody from Stieglitz and the equivalents, the photographs you did of clouds, in lots of ways. And you probably know that body of work. To Tiepolo—when in fact you have a painting called *Tiepolo's Caribbean*.

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, it's called *Tiepolo Caribbean*.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's right. That's right; it's not possessive. And even a piece like what *Moon Gravity* seems to me to have, a kind of sky that has the kind of rhythm of what might be Tiepolo. And I wonder, have you looked at other sky renderers for your work as ways of figuring out how you actually can make that space visible to the eye?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, *Tiepolo Caribbean* was a good little object lesson for me because I had gone to the Tiepolo show at the Met. And by the end of the show, I was just screaming in my head to get out of there because it was all so candy-colored and so over the top and kind of claustrophobic. And I just thought, "Uh, let me out of here. I can't stand one more minute of this." And the painting was also facile and, oh I don't know, I just got—I really got fed up with him by the end of that show. So I walked out of there. And then about a week later, I was working on that painting in my studio and I realized that I was like processing what I had seen, kind of unconsciously. It made me laugh, so I had to give him like—I had to give him the shared dedication for the title of the painting. But yeah. I've looked at all sorts of cloud-renderer artists. And I like—I mean, the whole—it's all very exciting. I like—there are some great photographers, too, that deal with skies and clouds more or less specifically. I do know—I'm not sure I'm familiar with the entire body of Stieglitz, but there was a photo that I had around for a long time that I particularly liked of his. I can't remember the title. But yeah. I mean, even people like Constable and what not.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But you don't actively—I mean, you don't go to the repertoire of painters who've painted or photographers who photograph skies to get aid in the rendering of what it is you're doing, either before or even during the process of making a painting. It's not that direct a kind of one-on-one relationship ever?

APRIL GORNIK: No, but I mean, there's certainly paintings and photographs that I've seen that I thought, "Geez, I wish I'd made that up. I wish I'd come up with that." You know, "I wonder if I can incorporate this in some way" and felt inspired by. Lots of that, you know, just sort of a free-flowing river through my life of, you know, work that I've thought was wonderful or inspiring or whatever.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yesterday when you talked about the Luminists, you mentioned—and as you didn't mention Martin Johnson Heade, who—I know you've sent me—

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, I didn't mention—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Not by name.

APRIL GORNIK: I forgot Martin.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And it interested me because you even send, you know, letters to people that have stamps that are based on his work. And I gather that he's a painter from among that group of painters that you're particularly fond of. And I wonder what it was and is about Heade that is of interest to you.

APRIL GORNIK: Oh. Did I send you a letter with a Heade stamp on it?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah. It was some pictures from one of Eric's shows, actually. And I thought, well, that's kind of interesting.

APRIL GORNIK: I don't recall that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I still have the envelope. I can send it back. [Laughs.]

APRIL GORNIK: I believe you. Martin Johnson Heade was such an interesting character because he has that profound stillness in his work. You know, it's just time ground to a halt, it seems to me. And it's almost like kind of, he grinds time to a halt, and then the color and the light seem to sort of seep back out at you from that, real slowly. And so there's this kind of richness from the extraordinary slo-mo kind of experience that you have that I think is rather unique. Plus, I think that there's a kind of abstraction in his work that I really like, compositional abstraction. It doesn't feel to me when I look at his work that he's being as pictorial as a lot of those artists that worked around the same time as he. But there's something that's deliberately more abstract, deliberately more reduced, deliberately more compositionally specific and less merely or purely pictorial.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: See, the relationship—

APRIL GORNIK: Even someone like Church—I know that sounds odd because, obviously, he was going for the spectacular, and he oftentimes did. But I don't think that his compositions have the same power, oftentimes, as Heade's.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You know, that issue of abstraction is an intriguing one. You have a painting called *Light after Heat*, I think, which reflects—the cloud is reflected both above and below and on the water. And it seems to me that when I saw it, I thought of Rothko. And it had something to do with the kind of float, sensation of the floating

shapes. And I wonder what your relationship to abstraction is. Not particularly to that branch of Abstract Expressionism, but when you're making landscapes, are you also dealing with shapes that easily lend themselves to a reading that becomes abstract? And yet you never push it in that direction.

APRIL GORNIK: I don't try to push it. But I think that that has a lot to do with the way that I choose to organize my compositions, is trying to figure out a way of getting something—like abstraction, to me, leads to something that's iconic, I think, now that I'm thinking about this. So that when I get just the right shape, when I get just the right placement of something in a painting, if I can make it feel absolute—I guess my idea about abstraction has more to do with Malevich than I realized. But if I can get it to feel sort of absolute, like it absolutely has to be this much mass of hill or chunk of light or something like that, then it becomes—it feels to me almost necessary and not just attractive or well placed. I mean, I guess I could say that a goal would be to have the element of abstraction in a painting give the painting a certain kind of charge because there's enough tension and release in the composition itself that the painting—it aids in the painting's sense of animation and feeling of it being kind of an active, alive object. And the thing that comes to mind when I'm thinking about this is seeing Ryoan-ji [Temple, Japan] for the first time, the only time, actually, that I saw it in my life, because I thought it was such a great lesson in the difference between composition and powerful abstraction, in the sense that I'm throwing these words around.

Now, we were at Ryoan-ji and I remember coming around the side of the building that borders it and seeing it. And I was so awestruck by it. I actually literally sat down. I've never had this happen to me. I just—I just saw it and kind of went, "Ah—oh, my God" and just sat my ass down and just stared at it for the longest time because, unlike my fantasy and from the photographs that I had seen of it, which tells you something about that kind of documentation, it looked as though the rocks were really beautifully placed. And what I actually experienced was like almost like a force field of space and tension between the rocks and their distances and the space of that garden and the sand. And it was just humming with, you know, this kind of almost electrical energy. I loved it. And it was amazing. And so I guess that would be a sort of a goal that I'd have for a painting is to get composition to that level of what I'm presently calling abstraction. I guess that's what I think about when I think about abstraction, as a way of honing in on elements in a painting or a work of art that give it its kind of, you know—what's an adjective for "bone"?—like the power of a bone in a structure. Is there such an adjective?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Not that I can think of right now. Anything I might come up with might sound vaguely obscene. So we should—[they laugh.]

APRIL GORNIK: Okay. I'm stopping now.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: So in that sense, I mean, when you talk of abstraction, it's not a gestural thing. It lends itself more then towards the philosophical reading rather than it being about mark-making. It's more structure than mark?

APRIL GORNIK: Yes, I think so. But you know, it's funny that you even mention mark-making because when I first started painting at all, like when I very, very first made the first landscapes, that I did because of my creative drawing class with Ed Mitchkowski, I thought of painting and drawing. I had reduced notions of painting and drawing to mark-making. And I literally thought, "I'll just accumulate enough marks until this thing becomes a painting." And that was really the first approach I took to painting. So you can imagine how someone with that kind of attitude has to actually learn to paint from scratch. It's almost a recipe for starting from scratch or something.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And scratch, again, is of course, mark-making. I mean, you're quite right. It's the right reduction, I think.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. I've never gotten into that scratching. I always admired the way that Matisse could scratch paintings and scratch off paint and make lines and elements. I can't even imagine doing that.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And you would draw the line, but—really?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. It just doesn't go with me, for some reason. But you know, I'm a huge fan of his work, so—huge. He is—he's everybody's other because nobody can paint like Matisse. It would be really interesting to see if anybody ever, ever used color like that again. I think he was—I think he might be the only extraterrestrial I feel I could prove has ever been visiting the earth. [They laugh.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You know, yesterday I got it wrong. I talked about a painting. You talked about the Robert Stone painting. And I said, "Oh, that's the one that makes me think for some reason of Munch." In fact, it wasn't that. It was the one called *Moonlight* that you did in 1989 that has that—that seems vaguely Munchian.

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, it's really humid.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah, yeah. I always think of that painting as being like the most successful water carrier. It's like my—wait a minute. Who's the water carrier? My Aquarian painting or something. And I don't mean that astrologically. But it's just like that painting, I wanted to just hold the sense of water and the sky and the earth. No, the Robert Stone painting is similarly symmetrical, but it's an entirely different—and it's blue.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yes, that's right.

APRIL GORNIK: It's an entirely different feeling. And it feels much further away from you than the *Moonlight* painting.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's right. You also have a painting called *Moon Lines*, which is—yesterday we talked about drama. And I said, you know, that I wanted to stay away from theatricality. And as I think about that painting, it was that incredibly dark—

APRIL GORNIK: That's the one with the big mass?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Huge masses of black coming down on the right-hand side. That is a distinctly dramatic painting.

APRIL GORNIK: That is from being on Long Island, standing at the beach, the moon came up, the sky was half black. I had a pen and a receipt in my purse, and I just like sort of made this sketch on it and made that painting from that. That was one of my most close to being a plein air artist. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Oh, really?

APRIL GORNIK: One of them, yeah. But yeah, that painting is very dramatic. But it's also, besides the drama of it, what I love about that painting is, how do you make a painting that's divided immediately in half? Which is something that endlessly fascinates me—I don't know why symmetry appeals to me so deeply. And I wonder oftentimes if it's more of a female thing than a male thing. But symmetry is just, you know, something I find endlessly satisfying. I should say the disturbance of symmetry, because it's not actual symmetry, but—and maybe it's that thing of always wanting to make an equation that can never quite balance, going back to that fractal notion. But, anyway.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: What has the role that criticism played? I know there was a period in the early '90s, I think, where you'd taken a very negative review of a show. And it really threw you off. It took from you, you said, the joy of painting.

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, that was fun.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And I guess I'm interested in what the relationship between you as a maker of things and then this other world that is—are the commentators on the things you make. Criticism can be a disastrously positive and disastrously negative thing. And I wondered if you'd talk a little bit about what the critical sphere has meant for your work.

APRIL GORNIK: I think that I'm incredibly thin-skinned, unfortunately. I am. It's an annoyance. But I don't know how to change that, frankly. I'm not one of those strong people that maybe don't even exist, but I guess there are a few of them somewhere. Or maybe they're so wonderfully narcissistic that, you know, it doesn't even occur to them to care. But yeah. I'd had this show. I was on the cover of *ArtNews* the year before. And then I had this show, and I thought that I'd made all these paintings that I was actually kind of, not so secretly, I guess, thinking to myself were kind of unassailably strong and good. And I just felt like I was on such a roll. And I felt so happy about it. And then I had this show. And I got three bad reviews. One was in the [*New York*] *Times*. One was in *ArtForum*. And one was someplace else I can't remember; maybe you know. But anyway, so I got these bad reviews. And instead of thinking to myself, as people have suggested, "Well, you know, maybe that was too much attention and so you were just kind of getting your—the balancing act from the critics," or, you know, shit happens. I was utterly flattened by it. I just felt undone.

And I went back into my studio, and it didn't feel like fun to make paintings. And I spent that whole summer after that and after getting the reviews making this one painting that was so dark. And I just couldn't finish it. And I kind of lost everything, my mojo, my energy, my intensity. And my dealer could see this at the work. He could see this at the time, and he wanted me to have another show. And he suggested that I do a show of drawings, which I did. And I think I put one painting in it that was not terrible, but not—still to this day is not one of my very favorite paintings, and I associate so much with that time period it's almost hard to see it.

And then really, it was over a year later, I think, that I started to think about—I think it was two years later, I

started to think about needing to find joy in painting again and lamenting the fact that I'd forgotten what it felt like when I was a student and I was all excited about getting into the studio and all excited about working. And I thought, How did that happen to me, that I've become like this person who produces these paintings, but they don't feel like anything anymore? And I was—I mean, I think I was really depressed, too. I mean, it wasn't just the reviews, I'm sure. I was going through a whole host of other things.

But as far as the art went, it mercifully occurred to me at one point to think about this book that I'd read by Carl Jung called *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, which is his autobiography. And in this book, he laments the fact that he's forgotten how to play. And that's when he's like in his mid-60s. And he spends—as I recall—I hope I have this right. But my recollection, and at the time my recollection was that he decided he was going to send himself out to play every day, all summer. And so he took himself down to this little ravine outside of his Swiss—wherever, you know, chalet that he lived in—and went down to the ravine and made himself like play with pebbles and stones. And I don't know what he was doing down there, building little things maybe.

And I thought, that's what I need. I need to remember how it feels to play. And I didn't want to make more drawings, because I'd made myself do the drawings show. And you know, I felt like I was just swimming up a stream constantly. And then I thought, well, maybe I'll try to make a little painting. I'll make a small painting. And if it doesn't work, I'll just throw it out. And so I made one small painting. And then I made another small painting. And about the same time, I got the computer, my first computer, which I—so this was like in '93-94, because I got the computer, I think, Christmas '93, to get organized. And so I got the computer. And then I started making these small paintings. And the first thing that happened was, the small paintings started reawakening my sense of play, because I could make a little painting. And if I liked or didn't like it, I could just toss it out. And it felt like it was allowing my process to be more fluid and playful.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And there's clearly less invested in it. I mean, it's not—

APRIL GORNIK: Way less, yeah. It wasn't like this big dramatic effort all the time. And then the computer—you know, as I'd mentioned, I scanned in this one photograph. So I was sort of doing busywork and trying to get my archives together—scanned in this photograph of this painting that I had done. And suddenly, the big lightbulb went on about, you know, like, oh, my God, I could play with this computer. I could use this as a sketch tool. And then everything just lightened immeasurably. And I got a huge amount back from those two things. And they started kind of coinciding as like a healing process for me. And then everything became incredibly fun again. And, knock wood, it still is. You know, it's just—it was a long. But it was a long chunk of time. It must have gone on for two and a half years or something, three years. It was a really long spate of misery. And it did start with the reviews. But again, I've never bothered to like thoroughly dissect, you know, like what else was going on at the time.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You read a lot. Now, do you read criticism now of, not just your work, but of other work? I mean, are you interested in the sort of the critical dialogue that goes on between makers and commentators?

APRIL GORNIK: I glance at it. There's a few writers that I like to read. I like to read—I like Donald Kuspit's writing, but I don't read it as much as I should. I don't read every single thing that he writes. And I like Peter Sheldal. And, you know, I like your magazine, *Border Crossings*. But I don't read everything in it. Like I'll glance through. If something starts to get my attention, then I'll read it harder. But in general—I mean, I think, for instance, for someone to take the time and energy to lambast someone's show, especially if they're not some hugely popular artist, some poor little artist working somewhere, another—you know, someone takes the time to do a real number on somebody and being really vicious toward them, I just think, What is the point of that? For the reader, for the artist, for the world—you know, and as a teacher, I'm a nice teacher to people, no matter how bad their work is. I'm not going to be the person that goes in there, as I've heard people say has happened to them and others, you know, "You shouldn't even be here. You shouldn't even be an artist." You know, forget about it. You never know what stage people are at. So I'm much more of a benefit-of-the-doubt sort of person.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: In '78 when you and Eric moved from Halifax and come to New York, did you quickly immerse yourself in the kind of scene? I mean, was it important for you to go and see shows so you could see what other people were doing, what your colleagues were doing in the community?

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, sure. Yeah. I mean, at that time I was religious about seeing every single thing that was being produced. And it's kind of funny that we moved to New York in early May '78. And there was like a mini-heat wave going on. And we were there one night. By the next night, we were having dinner with David Salle and Sherrie Levine at David's house, because he kindly—he knew Eric from CalArts. And he kindly had us over for like a spaghetti dinner, as I recall. And you know, we had just gotten there and I was so excited. And I said, "I just got here. And I'm not even going to look for a waitressing job for a couple of weeks. I have a little money saved." And Sherry said, "You're a waitress? We need a waitress at McGoo's. Can you come in tomorrow?" And I kind of went, shit. "All right. I'll come in tomorrow." But I was really sad about that. So you know, we just really hit the ground running and then met a lot of other people. It was very easy. And I hate to get nostalgic about,

you know, the way it was. But Soho and downtown New York was just so much more of a neighborhood-y feel at that time. And I think it's become way more corporate. I don't know what young artists do now. I guess they all live in Brooklyn. But who could afford to live in Manhattan? It's a shame that the city has changed so much that way.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, when you're involved in a community like that and you know other artists, is that also a way that it feeds your own inspiration about making work?

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, sure.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, when you come into the studio, you know that other people are doing it. And so there is this thing called a community that resides somewhere in your mental space?

APRIL GORNIK: Yes, definitely, because they are your friends and they're all artists and you all talk about art and argue about art. I mean, we used to see David a lot. And he had sort of theories about personality. Personality of the artist was the most important thing. And that's like so not like me, but I still found it fascinating that he had this theory. And, you know, we were watching everybody have shows. And obviously, it was soon the '80s. And Neoexpressionism, so-called, was back. And there was a lot painting to get excited about. So that was a nice time to have coincided with coming to New York. And the people whose work we saw, you know, we were anxious to be critical and enthusiastic and all about it. And I liked seeing—although I was kind of odd person out as a landscape painter—I mean, there was—David True was in that new image show. And I'd seen his work in Halifax when he came to talk. And that was encouraging. He was sort of an inspiration to me, you know, because he managed to do these kind of landscape-y things. His work got much more surreal, much—very fast. But you know, there was that little body of boats in water that sort of gave me permission more to work the way I was working. And then there was the German invasion, as it were, and Keifer. And that was very exciting to see, his work. And you know, so that's sort of like the stuff that got me more personally excited, I guess.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This raises an intriguing question for me. As we were talking yesterday, you made it fairly clear that in a sense you're in the American grain, that while you have admiration for European painting and that tradition and in fact, talking about Vermeer, the painting that catalyzes you early on without your being fully aware of how important it is is after all by a European painter. But I gather you see yourself very firmly in the American tradition, that you're an American painter. There's no way of dealing with that other than to say it directly.

APRIL GORNIK: You know, it's not something that I aspire to or feel positive or negative about. It just seems to me—it seemed to me when we were talking yesterday, I really hadn't voiced it so clearly ever before. But it suddenly seemed to me that there is something that's just very typically American about the way that my work has evolved. And even when I would look at the American Luminist painters versus the European landscape painters, like Bierstadt and people like that—who I think of as a European painter, even though he hung out here.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: But certainly—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Constable?

APRIL GORNIK: No, the *Woman at the Window*—Friederich, Casper David Friedrich.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Oh, Casper David Friedrich.

APRIL GORNIK: You know, it's like people will frequently cite Friedrich to me. And to me, he's a Symbolist. And his landscapes are just a context or a pretext for Symbolism.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's the ice floes. It's probably that one ice painting that they think of somehow, and they connect that to your work rather more than the whole, the entire body of work.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. Yeah, but I think of it is like—you know, the oeuvre is like the one by the window and the cross-shaped window, and you know, it's like so much more symbolic. *The Lone Tree*, even, is like such a crucifixion, or whatever.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: It just doesn't—so I mean, a lot of that work seems more firmly attached to the European tradition. And I think there is more of a split. But I don't know what to think about being, you know, labeled an American artist or whatever. I showed a tiny little bit in Europe, but not very much. But I'm also so un-prolific, it's hard for me to get shows together for elsewhere. I mean, it really is. I'm just not a fast painter. So I mean, it

would be nice to be a bigger part of the greater art dialogue in people's minds. And yet, the kind of eccentric position that I have in the art world is, to me, a good stud and given me a way of not having to go back to waiting tables. [Laughs.] So how much can I complain?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You didn't wait tables for very long in New York, did you? A couple of years when you came?

APRIL GORNIK: Well, I waited tables from when I was, I think, 18 or 19, until—when was that? It was a pretty long stint. I guess it was traumatic enough [laughs] to make me make remarks like that about it. But yeah, I mean, you know. Were you ever a waiter?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: No. [Laughs.]

APRIL GORNIK: Well, then, you never had those dreams of, all of a sudden you're working in a restaurant again, trying to remember how to do it. It's nerve-wracking. It's like—it's an incredibly useful job because it gives you lots and lots of time in your studio because you only have a work a couple of days a week. But it's nerve-wracking and anxiety-producing. And I'm not a good act-like-you're-happy kind of person. So I was sometimes a grouchy waitress, and sometimes a fired-for-being-grouchy waitress.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Ooh. Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

APRIL GORNIK: That happened to me once or twice, yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Let's talk a little bit about the role that travels play in the way that, again, you feed your imagination, maybe directly into your dream life or maybe it's just really optical and experiential. But you have traveled a fair amount, it seems, and it seems to be important to you.

APRIL GORNIK: I love it. Well, it's part of my curiosity thing, too. But, yeah, I love to travel. I love to see places I haven't seen and see what the difference is between what I know and what I imagine, what I think I know and what is actually there.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And it translates itself directly into your work, though. I mean, you start doing the trees and water, don't you, from a trip to France?

APRIL GORNIK: To France, yeah. It wasn't my first trip to France. But it was—that was definitely a mind-boggling experience for me, the flooded—war valley-flooded, is basically where that comes from. And I remember, you know, when we got to the hotel that evening, we were traveling and just finding hotels as we traveled. And I remember getting to this hotel in the area. It was right there at the Charente, and you know, kind of trying to express in broken and over-excited French how thrilling I thought all of that flooding was. And they were rolling their eyes, like, "Yeah, the flood, big deal. You know, this happens every year." But to me, it just seemed like this wonderfully surreal, naturally surreal. That's a phrase I've used an awful lot. A wonderfully, naturally surreal situation in which, you know, the earth had been consumed by itself by this water, this water event. And yet it had become even more firmly architectural from it. So there was this great paradox. Who wouldn't want to paint something like that?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, it's interesting, you thirst for experience and so sort of feed your head that way. And yet then you find ways almost invariably to then use the landscape. It becomes part of your work. This has clearly happened with Africa, which has become the place that you clearly are utterly fascinated by for the last couple of years.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, Africa is so interesting on so many levels. Some of the paintings that you see that are in the studio, like the paintings of the dunes, come from having been to this place called Sossusvlei in Namibia. And I specifically wanted to see that because the first trip—I don't know why this happened. For years, because a friend of mine had had a terrible—she'd had an aneurism in Africa and was hospitalized, had to be brought back. She was—it was a disaster. And the hospitalization and organizing things from here, it was a nightmare for everybody involved. And I'd always been a little afraid to go to Africa, frankly, because it just seemed so, you know, like too much disease, malaria, snakes, AIDS, you name it. It just seemed like a kind of semi-terrifying place. Although I had friends that loved it and had been there, I was just like chicken about going there.

And then for some reason, about a year and a half ago, or maybe almost two years now, I just thought to myself, the only place I want to go is Africa. And I want to see animals. I want to see animals. I'm very concerned about biodiversity and species extinction and all of those forthcoming worsening problems. And I just thought, this is the only thing I really want to do is go to Africa. So I started researching it online, where I research everything. And in looking at—I'd talked to a friend who'd suggested Botswana as a great place to see animals. And in doing that, I came across a website that had an itinerary for travel to Botswana that included a brief stay in Namibia. And I saw pictures of these dunes for the first time. And when I saw them, I suddenly thought to myself, "Oh, this is that place that's at the beginning of that movie *The English Patient*." I could see, even looking at side-angle

view of the dunes, that from the top it must have been that sea of dunes that was in that movie.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That very sensual opening, which was just voluptuous and very—

APRIL GORNIK: It's a frozen sea. It's a sea of frozen movement of all these dunes that have slowly accumulated. The dunes are like—I think it's 90 miles inland. It's almost 100 miles inland. They are 1000 feet tall. And it's just mile after miles after—it's literally like seeing big, frozen waves on the ocean that are just, you know, suspended in time. So I felt like, oh, my God, that must be the same place. I want to see that, too. So I called this travel company that a friend had used and asked them if they could make us an itinerary where we'd go there and then we'd go Botswana and see animals. So that was a very deliberate attempt to see a particular kind of landscape.

A similar thing happened when we went to China, because I had seen a picture online of Gui-lin, the mountains in China that are so precipitously, bizarrely spiky. And I painted a painting from having seen pictures online of it, which I entitled *Gui-lin Imagined*. And then when we went to China, I, you know, said, "I have to go see this place." And it was absolutely mind-blowing. It's phenomenal, again, a naturally surreal landscape, as I would call it. Ditto these dunes.

Then last year, we went to Tanzania, you know, just like a few months ago we went to Tanzania. And I was working out that trip as a celebration of Eric's birthday, his recent 60th birthday. And I'd wanted to go there because I thought it would be fun to go back to Africa because we enjoyed being in Africa so much. But I was not thinking of it as like a landscape trip. I was thinking of it as a mobile, tented, camping trip, which is great fun and really an unusual thing to do, and seeing all these fantastic animals and the Serengeti, whatever that meant. I didn't really understand it. You know, it was something that I—again, photographs don't quite convey the experience of it. And there were two specifically extraordinary things about that landscape experience, which is what it turned out to be for me, in Tanzania, both utterly unexpected.

One was that it was two weeks before the rainy season, and I didn't realize we were that close to the rainy season. So pretty much every day there would be some unbelievable bank of storm clouds on the horizon somewhere, or we'd get caught in a little rain, but it wasn't ever, you know, like too bad, in terms of traveling. But there would be these unbelievable clouds and light situations. And the light there has this kind of—I don't know if there's a lot of dust—there is a lot of dust in the air. There is this kind of, like you can see through the air in Africa in a different way. Light gets suspended and stays in the air differently than some other places. So I ended up taking, like 1500 photographs because I was so—I mean, of animals, too, et cetera. But I was really blown away by just the light. I guess—I don't know if it's typical of that time of year. But at that time of year, it was certainly amazing, when we were there.

And then the other thing is that I've read about this phenomenon of there being a kind of a hard-wired response that people have to the savannah that is actually the inspiration for the way that suburbia looks, at least in America, which is a long, flat, green grassland, and then an occasional tree that sticks up. And that people recognize that as kind of the original, the aboriginal, if you will, landscape that affords security and a good place to call home. So there are theories that this is hard-wired into our being, that you see a grassland and you see a tree or two, and it triggers this sense of security and place that's secure and yet comfortable and means safety, means you can thrive there. And so when we were in—one of the first places we went was to this park called Tarangeri. And Tarangeri is a park in which there are occasional huge baobab trees.

But the nature of this landscape, if you will—just imagine this—if you could imagine a forest, a normal forest that you might have in North America as we experience. And then imagine giants, four giant gods or goddesses holding onto the four corners of a landscape and just stretching it so all the trees are much further apart than they are in a forest. And you have grassland in between and some areas of larger grassland. That's the way it looks. And all of us there just were so awestruck by the peculiar beauty of this. And I felt it—I'm telling you. I felt it resonate so deeply in my being. And I've heard so many people say, you know, you go to Africa and you feel like, "Oh, I know this. It's true. This is primal. This is where I come from," like there is this like big echo of it.

So I haven't done any paintings like that yet. I'm still trying to figure out like, how could I paint this landscape that would somehow convey what I felt there? But the remarkable resonant quality of the African landscape is not to be ignored. It really blew my mind. And I'd never—you know, I'd seen the landscape in Botswana was beautiful and the landscape in Namibia was extraordinary. And that I expected. But I had not expected the landscape in Tanzania to be so—to rattle me so deeply and stuff.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Clearly, you will paint it, though?

APRIL GORNIK: I hope I can figure it out. You know, I might not be able to. But I'm going to try.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But what you've—I mean, when you raise the question of abstraction, it's fascinating. When I first saw this painting, not seeing it in the studio, but seeing it online, in a smaller format it looks abstract. And

you think—and then I realize that, of course, it has to be something that April saw. This is something—and that's what it looks like. I mean, but it's bizarre that you've got this gorgeous, scalloped, orange thing sitting in light in the middle of this blackish mountain.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, of course, most of the photographs that you see of these dunes are more of the lit-up part. But I was also really captivated by the colors in the shadows when I saw that landscape in the desert. So that painting, I just ended up kind of cropping and, again, compositionally rearranged it so that it ended up being like a kind of a celebration of the shadows, but with this extraordinary kind of shape of light sitting in the middle of it that has this kind of velocity to it, in my opinion.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: This is not a question, because it asks the question about what we both hope is of a far-distant future. But what does it all add up to, the making of landscape painting? I mean, where do you see yourself being as a landscape painter? Is there a larger project in mind, or is it a sort of painting-by-painting relationship, that you make a painting and then you're compelled to make another one because you want to? I guess I'm asking if you can even imagine where you would want to be in the trajectory of American landscape painting when people look back on what it is you paint.

APRIL GORNIK: I have no idea. And frankly, I think one's historical place is largely a matter of luck and accidental timing. Maybe I should say chance and accidental timing. But honestly, I mean, you know, the way that Vermeer was ignored and then resurrected—I have no idea. I feel like at the same time, incredibly lucky that I do have a career and I am seen as, you know, having some importance within the American art scene as an inheritor of a carrier-on-er of the landscape painting tradition or whatever. I'll take that, even though I don't think that my work is really directly out of Luminism. And in fact, I'm not directly out of it.

On the other hand, I feel like—just like most artists, I would say all artists I know, I wish I were more famous, better known, more celebrated, on the tip of other people's tongues and art minds. And you can't control that. You know, so the idea of trying to imagine what I might, you know—to what point I might direct my career or move—I have no idea. I just can't go there. It would make me insane. It's bad enough when I get jealous of somebody, you know, whose career is doing well or something. I hate feeling jealous, you know, but I do. I'm just like everybody else.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I guess—I guess that's—I think that's—I can't think of other specific paintings to get you to talk about. I can't think of any—we seem to have covered pretty well everything. I will get you—when we talk, all three of us, about your relationship, because that's where a painting like *April in Paris* comes up, and I'm still fascinated by a painting of—one painter doing another painter is always interesting, especially given the nature of your relationship. But that's something we should probably hold for that conversation, because I can get both of you to kind of feed into that. But the one painting called *Pulling Moon*, which you did in '83, you know. It seems—it's the first time in your painting where it seems like the landscape is collaged or that there are so many component parts, the jigsaw, curious nature of the clouds and the sky and the shape.

APRIL GORNIK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It seems to be, in that sense, a more resonantly conceived painting, rather than being one that would have come out of a dream. And I want to get you to talk a little bit about—if you can recall—where it came from and why it became the kind of painting it is.

APRIL GORNIK: Where did that painting come from? I remember drawing it. I guess I'd have to look in my notebook to see if it would jog my mind as to where it came from. But I don't have a clear sense of it. I have to say that I know exactly what you mean about how collaged it is and how it's kind of piece-mealed, pieced together.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: It's not atmospheric in the way your paintings can often be.

APRIL GORNIK: It's not atmospheric. But I think—you know, it's funny that that painting was painted after *Two Rocks*, for instance, which I think, even though it's surreal, it has more of its own inherent atmosphere. It feels more whole, in a sense. And that one has this kind of funny separation. I like the idea of making more animated-looking paintings, like when I referenced Burchfield before. And I think that for a time, I was thinking that that was maybe part of the conversation that I was having in my studio, that you'd get paintings that were more overtly surreal, collaged, et cetera. And then you'd get paintings that were more naturalistic. But I've been less comfortable with that kind of patching together of a painting. I seem to want to—you know, the direction that I've taken in the work, too, is as I'm working a painting up, is to get like more and more intensely detailed so that they tend not—I tend not to be comfortable with an element simply residing near another. I have to make them live in the same space together.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: And be integrated more.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I mean, in a sense, the reason one comes up with the idea of collage is though, it looks as if the components of the landscape are set in place, rather than being sort of massaged into us onto a surface somehow.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. And I'm not so comfortable with that idea of collaging or setting against or juxtaposition.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You also are able to run—if I think of the difference between some of those beautiful kind of atmospheric Chinese paintings, as opposed to the storm paintings you'll do. And when you talk about the range of emotion that your work is able to inhabit and embody, they are pretty radical extremes, aren't they? I mean, your landscape range is quite broad.

APRIL GORNIK: You mean the emotional range of it?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, in a way, even the way they look. I mean, you get a dramatic storm building up, and then you've got this exquisite, almost-not-there sense of landscape, which is—

APRIL GORNIK: The evanescent landscape.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: —could disappear—exactly, yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. I think of those as the evanescent landscapes.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Yeah. That's a good word.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, it's funny, too, because they can be painted really differently. The Gui-lin paintings, for instance, as I tend to think of them as a group, even though they're really of a place called Guangxi, where the sky and the water just sort of sit in suspension. I mean, I was really trying to paint the atmosphere as directly as possible, like paint the air as directly as possible, which actually made me—I remember at the time thinking, "This must be what Impressionists felt like." You know, but I was taking a different tack toward it. Those paintings, the Gui-lin paintings, have many, many, many layers of paint on the top and the bottom. And it was the only way I could figure out to get the amount of color and variety of color and suspension of light going. And it wasn't even something that I planned on. It was just the way that I needed to make it in order to make it work like that.

And then some of these other paintings that I do are almost like this—I keep hesitating to say this because I'm not sure I'm using the term correctly—but a *la prima* is paint out of the tube and just kind of painting much, much, much directly. There's always under-painting going on, of course, but in the case of the Gui-lin paintings, there's a huge amount of painting over and under and over and under. And there's a lot of instances in which I'll get an under-painting going, paint on top of it, and then have to work that color back in wet on wet, so that I sort of subtly pull it back up, so it's keyed just a little, little more on the surface, so that a shadow will have like a kind of bright edge in it or some things. There's a lot of like little things like that that I end up doing.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Recently in New York, there was the Jasper Johns gray on gray painting. And I noticed—and maybe it's just—

APRIL GORNIK: Which one, *The Clock and the Bed* [sic]?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Just—he used gray a lot. And you use gray a lot as well, it seems. Is that just because of the paintings in the studio? Although, as I've thought through the work, you have a tonal sort of interest in shifts of gray a lot of the time.

APRIL GORNIK: Well, I love drawing. And I like black and white, generally. And the idea of making—you know, it occurred to me a pretty long time ago—I think it was in 1987. The first painting that comes to mind was a painting called *Renata's Lake*, which was actually named after listening to Renata Tebaldi sing arias, over and over and over again in my studio during this obsessive compulsive period I went through with opera, where I listened to it like pretty much night and day for about six or seven years. That was fun for Eric.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Laughs.]

APRIL GORNIK: And anyway, that painting *Renata's Lake*, I had this desire to make this kind of painting with silvery light. And I would just have the most minimal amount of color, like you'd see that there was color in it, but it would all be almost kind of embedded in this kind of silvery thing that was going on. And then after that, I had more interest in, you know, like how black and white could a painting be, but still be in color? And it wasn't—I mean, I'm saying this and it sounds theoretical. But it was actually something that I was thinking of as a sensual experience, not as a theoretical attempt to do a particular kind of painting—something. I hope that

makes sense.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

APRIL GORNIK: And then black and white just, you know, keeps emerging in certain instances. It just becomes important. Like in the seascape painting, it's very black and white and gray. But there's also kinds of colors in a reduced, controlled way in certain areas.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: You have a painting—I've forgotten the name of it—a fabulous painting that is a sandstorm developing, which when we talked yesterday about architecture, there's all the plumes, the funnels of the sand coming down. It forms a huge architectural amphitheater, it looks like from a distance. It's kind of an amazing painting. Do you know the one I'm talking about?

APRIL GORNIK: I'm not sure I do.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: I wish I could remember the name of it. The reason I think about it is because it seems so architectural-looking. That whole question of how a landscape, when it begins to be made and finally ends up being made, can not aspire towards, but becomes a kind of architectonic space, rather than simply a landscape space, if that means anything. And I guess it was that painting that—and I think that's a given. I think you must have taken a picture—

APRIL GORNIK: Oh, this is the one that I talked—that I talked about yesterday that had the clouds across the desert and you can see the—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Well, the sand is at the top and then the sand plumes—it looks like the billow, it's like almost lifting off of the sand, coming up. But there's six or seven of them across the—

APRIL GORNIK: I think that's supposed to be rain.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Is it?

APRIL GORNIK: I think that's that storm—it's a painting called *Storm Crossing the Desert*, from about '83.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Probably. Probably, yeah. That's a very architectural—

APRIL GORNIK: They're gray?

ROBERT ENRIGHT: That's right, yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. That was the one to which I was referring yesterday when I was talking about having had a dream and then thinking about that I could see the exterior past those—what turned out to look like pillars almost.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: Exactly, yeah.

APRIL GORNIK: I know. It's so sort of stylized that—

ROBERT ENRIGHT: But that's a dream? The origin for that is dream rather than an observation?

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah, it was a dream. No, it was a dream that I had, a very specific dream that was all about that. I should paint a sandstorm, though. I don't know what's wrong with me not having done so.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Laughs.]

APRIL GORNIK: I do like water better than dry, generally, so maybe that's why.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: The landscape is for you, clearly, an endless—it's a tabula rasa, isn't it. I think Landscape, with a capital L, is something that you—and the way you talk about Africa, clearly, it's the never-ending pictorial story for you.

APRIL GORNIK: It seems to be. And then there is also, you know, questions to me about landscape about space itself and depth of space and landscape that's more or less frontal. Like in the studio here, there's a couple of paintings that have—I mean, that painting has a lot of depth. And that one is much more frontal. The one to the right is much more—it's sort of a combination. I mean, there's like—there are so many variations within it. Like it does seem endless. And how a painting is entered by the viewer's eye, like whether they're rushed in or whether they are stopped almost immediately, how far to let them go. I mean, architecturally, there's this enormous breadth of possibility that just goes on forever in my head.

ROBERT ENRIGHT: In a painting like *After Eden*, you in fact make a kind of proscenium stage almost of black, but then—and then the white billowing clouds behind. You're invited into them because in fact it's almost theatrical in the way you're obliged to enter that painting.

APRIL GORNIK: Yeah. It is. It is. Yes. And you know, I've used this idea of there being a kind of proscenium presence in the architecture of the paintings. And as someone who doesn't know really anything about the stage, I probably shouldn't be throwing that work around, although Renato Danase, my dealer, said to me that for me light is the protagonist in my work. And I thought that was such a great remark, which of course makes me think about light, light strutting and fretting its hour upon stages that I give it. [Telephone ringing.]

ROBERT ENRIGHT: [Inaudible] agents and managers calling, you'd better get that phone call or it will never stop.

APRIL GORNIK: It's probably Robby.

[END OF TRACK AAA_gornik08_4122.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]